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BEWARE THE KINDLY STRANGER

Why did Mr. Asmodeus welcome Marie into his home... to help her, or to destroy her?

Diane

TERROR FROM THE SEA . . .

A chill went through Marie as Mr. Asmodeus, his burning eyes fixed on the sea, brooded on his strange, unhappy memory.

"The sea I remember was much different from the calm one we stand beside now." The hawk-like face mirrored a deep anguish. "I think of a storm—the howling wind and mountainous waves!"

Marie was awed by his manner. She stood on the deserted beach, staring at the millionaire, and suddenly recalled Jean Martin's account of her weird nightmare. Her dear friend had seen an eerie stranger in her dream whom she chose to identify as Asmodeus—a mocking phantom with seaweed draped from his shoulders.

And, staring now at Asmodeus with terrified eyes, Marie saw the seaweed as Jean had described it!

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Clarissa Ross

BEWARE THE KINDLY STRANGER

MAGNUM EASY EYE EDITIONS

MAGNUM BOOKS
NEW YORK

To Reva Kindser, editor and friend.

BEWARE THE KINDLY STRANGER

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CHAPTER ONE

The pale blue-tinged moon showed briefly between the tall buildings that made a canyon of Madison Avenue. Marie Holt stood for a moment on the sidewalk in front of the small street level art gallery she'd opened near the corner of Seventy-Ninth Street. It was after ten o'clock and the street was almost deserted on this early spring night. She'd been doing some after-hours work arranging a window display for the gallery and had stepped outside to study the arrangement of paintings in the single window. Then her attention had been distracted by the lovely moon.

She gazed up at it and her sensitive, pretty face took on a rapt expression. She was dark-haired with large, expressive gray eyes, a pert nose and a

rather sensuous, full-lipped mouth. An artist herself, she'd opened the gallery with a modest, unexpected legacy but her first interest was still painting. And so the beauty of this moon over Manhattan made an impact on her.

As she stared up at its pale orb, dark clouds came to obscure it. With regret she saw the moon almost blacked out. But even this change brought a fresh interest. For the pattern of the clouds against the ghostly moon left a small area of light revealed in the pattern of an animal hoof! It was so plain it made her smile in puzzled speculation and recall childhood games when she'd tried to identify shadows. Then the clouds became heavier and the moon was completely obscured leaving the narrow avenue an ordinary street again. With a small sigh of regret she turned her attention to the gallery window.

What she saw pleased her. She had set up several orange spotlights to enhance the display of three Jean Martin religious paintings in ornate gold frames. The paintings were fairly large, depicting the agony of the Crucifixion, a kneeling Moses high on the mountain and a tortured Samson bringing down the pillars of the temple. All typical Jean Martin studies in glowing colors, full of movement and emotion. Marie liked the girl's work and though she was comparatively unknown was featuring this selection of her paintings.

Satisfied with the window Marie went on into the small store she'd rented and whose walls were

lined with a broad selection of paintings. She had returned to do this late evening work because her fiancé, Hugh James, a young public relations man with a company on Park Avenue, had called her to cancel a dinner date. He was tied up with work and so they had decided he would meet her at the gallery when he finished and they'd go somewhere for a midnight snack.

She decided to leave the lights in the gallery window on so Hugh would see her display when he arrived and be able to offer his opinion of it. Now she went to the rear of the gallery where there was a small cubicle which served her as an office. With the door open so she could see into the gallery and the street beyond she sat down at her desk. A tiny frown crossed her attractive face as she studied the figures on the pages of the open accounts book.

So far the gallery had not paid its way. But then she'd only been open a few months. She'd barely had time to attract attention to her project and collect suitable artists to hang. The effort had taken a lot from her own painting. She'd done very little work since giving most of her attention to getting the gallery under way. But soon she must begin to make money or give up the project.

She stared at the troublesome figures and sighed. The cold logic of the ledger could not be denied. And the memory of the tiny bank balance left after she'd drawn money for expenses that morning made her edgy. Something had to happen

soon or she'd wind up with her money lost and the gallery project at an end. And Hugh would tease her in his quiet way and remind her he'd warned her against the venture.

It was something she would never have done if an obscurely remembered uncle in a mid-Western town had not died and to her surprise included her in his will. The legacy had not been sizeable but sufficient to suggest she try opening a gallery. Her own portrait painting brought her in a modest income. But she had not earned a reputation in the field and so few commissions came her way. The gallery seemed an ideal way to augment her income and assist other young artists. One night she'd broached this to Hugh as they'd sat talking in her modest studio apartment on East Eighty-Fourth Street.

Hugh, an affable young man, with a mop of blond hair, a genial smile and a slim Brooks Brothers' look, had been slightly alarmed at the idea. "Madison Avenue is lined with art galleries now," he'd reminded her.

Seated on the divan beside him, at ease in yellow lounging pajamas, and with her feet curled up under her, she'd argued, "Isn't there always room for one more?"

"There isn't room for all of them now," he suggested with a shrewd glance of his blue eyes. "I know a couple that only survive because they are a hobby of wealthy owners. And you don't qualify in that class."

She'd listened with her head to one side. "I have enough to open a gallery and keep it going a month or two until the money starts to roll in."

"Suppose it doesn't roll in?"

"That's a dreadful thought!" she pouted.

He'd smiled and sat back against the divan. "Better face it now before you make the big leap. And what about your own painting? It would be bound to suffer."

"I'd still be able to do all the work that is sent me," she'd argued. She received most of her portrait commissions through an agency on Fifty-Seventh Street which represented a number of artists like herself who specialized in doing studies of people.

"Better put that money away for a rainy day," was Hugh's advice. "We'll be getting married soon and you won't have any time for sidelines."

She'd frowned. "That's what worries me. I'd like to try this before then. Otherwise I may never get a chance to do it at all."

"In that case go ahead," Hugh had teased her. "I don't mind marrying a poor girl."

She'd laughed. "Would you refuse to marry a rich one? I might open the gallery and make a fortune!"

"That's strictly dream stuff!" Hugh said.

"No, I mean it," she'd insisted. "I already have the promise of several good artists that they'll allow me exclusive sales rights to their works. Jean

Martin is one of them and I'm sure she'll be famous one day."

Hugh's pleasant face had shown interest. "Isn't she the one who does the religious paintings?"

"Yes. She's shown quite a few important places and received good reviews."

He nodded. "I know. Her Bible studies are colorful. Plenty of action in them, too."

"She seems to really see those long-ago happenings."

"Is she religious, herself?" Hugh asked. "I've wondered. Not having met her it's hard to decide the kind of person she is."

Marie had smiled. "You'd like her. I'm sure of that. And she's not at all religious in a conventional way, though she has a deep belief in some kind of deity."

"How can she make those canvases so vivid then?"

She'd shrugged. "Because the Bible themes catch her imagination. After all it is great literature. And she brings the word images to life."

"Do people still buy religious paintings?"

"Of course!"

"I'm surprised," he said. "Knowing that it's not a deeply religious era. And I'd expect that most of the purchases would be for reprints of famous works rather than original art."

"There are still collectors who specialize in that form of art," Marie had told him. "And once Jean becomes known to them she'll do well."

"I hope so," Hugh had said. And then he'd added, "But you haven't told me the sort of person she is."

Marie had scanned him with a twinkle in her gray eyes. "You sound much too interested in her for an engaged man."

"No. I'm just trying to picture her."

"She's about a year older than I am."

"Attractive?"

"Yes. If you like ash-blondes."

"I do."

"Jean is a true one," she said. "She keeps a good deal to herself. Even at art school she was a loner. And now I only see her at wide intervals. She has an apartment and studio in a tall loft building in the East Village."

"Interesting," Hugh had said. "No romance in her life?"

"Not that I know of. She is dedicated to her work."

"Pretty rough on her," he'd suggested. "I mean this must be a lonely life for her."

"Not if she keeps busy painting," Marie had explained. "Any time I've met her she's seemed perfectly happy. She's a very well-adjusted person who knows exactly what she wants."

"And that is?"

"To paint."

"Not money or fame?"

She shook her head. "I don't see them as that important to her. She paints because she must. It

is her way of expressing herself. Of communicating. Probably she feels she has a message of some sort."

Hugh had given her a mocking smile as he got up. "I'll never truly understand artists."

Marie had also gotten to her feet. "I can't say I dig public relations as an especially interesting career. Even though I know you're good at it."

He'd winced. "You're prejudiced!"

"Maybe," she'd teased him. "But always in your favor."

He'd then taken her in his arms for a good-night kiss and with a rueful smile, said, "Go ahead with your gallery if you must. Only remember that I warned you against it."

So she had gone ahead with her plan. In the beginning she'd been full of excitement and high hopes. There had been the trying task of finding a suitable small shop vacant on Madison Avenue where she wished to locate the gallery. Many of the successful small galleries were along that street and she felt it was where she should try to be. At last she found a linen shop that wanted to move and sub-lease its Madison Avenue quarters. And so she at least had a premises to convert to a gallery.

Once she'd embarked on the venture Hugh had been generous with advice, encouragement and even his time. As a result she'd managed to open the gallery fairly quickly. Her friend, Jean Martin, had also been her enthusiastic supporter and ar-

rived in blue jeans and pullover day after day to help her decorate the gallery.

It was during those days of painting walls and ceilings and laying carpet that she and Jean had discussed life and art. She'd learned a lot about the blonde girl and what her painting meant to her.

Jean had once paused as they were installing shelves at the rear of the gallery to ask her, "What do you see in my paintings? I mean, really see."

Marie had thought for a moment. "I'm not sure. They have a marvelous quality of reality. You make the Bible stories seem vivid and true."

The ash-blonde Jean had smiled at her thoughtfully. "I got that vision from my maternal grandmother. She was a dyed-in-the-wool religionist. I promise you she believed the forces of good and evil were always battling. And when I was a small girl she solemnly told me to always be on the side of the good."

"Excellent advice."

"I suppose, though I don't see the world or religion as she did, I was influenced by her," the other girl said. "And I derived my Biblical visions from her. It's my way of making a stand for good. By reminding people of the ancient Bible stories."

"And an interesting one," Marie had said.

Jean smiled sadly. "To my grandmother the devil was a real person! He really existed! Ready to take advantage of the unwary at any moment."

Marie laughed. "You mean she actually thought he walked the earth as a human."

"In human guise," the pretty blonde in the green pullover corrected her. "My grandmother believed the Devil could take on any identity he liked to do his wicked work."

"A superstitious lady!"

"Very much so," Jean had agreed. "She used to make me sit at her feet as she recited Southey's poem about the devil coming for the body of an old woman who had been one of his disciples." She laughed. "I can still remember a few words of it here and there like, 'he laid his hand on the coffin lid and bade the Old Woman of Berley arise' and 'the Devil he flung her on her horse, And he leapt on before, And away like the lightning's speed they went. And she was seen no more.' I always used to wind up trembling when she finished with that!"

"Your grandmother influenced you a lot."

"She surely did," Jean said. "Sometimes I think she may have been right about the devil. Once when I was alone, late at night, in a subway car, an ugly old man came and sat across from me. He leered at me as we clattered and lurched downtown in the murkily lighted car and I was sure he was the devil who had come to take me to task for my Bible paintings."

The girl sounded so serious that Marie stared at her somewhat awed. "You're joking of course!"

"No. I mean it."

"Did anything happen?"

"Yes and no," the girl said in a troubled voice.

"The train came to a station and quite a few other passengers came into the car. So I felt I was safe. I looked across the car to see if the strange old man was still seated opposite me and he had vanished."

"He'd gotten out of the car when you made the stop."

Jean's eyes were deadly serious as she gazed at her and told her, "I said vanished. And that was exactly how it happened. No one left the car at that station. People got on but no one got off. It happened just as I told you, he vanished!"

"You honestly think that?"

"Yes."

An eerie feeling had swept through Marie at the girl's solemn statement. And then she persuaded herself that this was merely an example of the artist's too vivid imagination. All temperamental people were superstitious and Jean was proving no exception.

She said, "It's a strange story."

"It's the truth," the other girl assured her. Soberly she added, "Not long ago I had a similar strange experience."

Marie frowned. "Another one?"

"Yes. This took place at my studio."

"Tell me."

Jean's pretty face shadowed. "I was working when I heard a knock on my apartment door. I never open the door until I'm sure who it is. I always keep it on a chain. So I went over and asked who was there. The hallway was dark and I

couldn't see well out there. A voice said it was a friend. I recognized the voice as belonging to an artist I know named Jim, so I opened the door at once."

"And?"

Jean looked tense as she recalled the episode. "It wasn't Jim! It was a horrible-looking, huge man who came lurching towards me. I screamed and dodged as he tried to take hold of me. Then he lumbered on into the room and began ripping my paintings from the studio walls. He even took a fresh canvas from the easel and stamped his foot through it. I ran down the stairs and out into the street terrified."

Marie listened with growing amazement. "And then what?"

"I finally found a policeman in a patrol car parked about a block away. He drove me back and we went upstairs to my studio."

"And?"

"The stranger had gone after leaving my place a mess and ruining at least seven or eight paintings."

Marie stared at her. "But that can't have any special meaning. It was just some crazy man whose voice sounded like your friend's. And the stranger left while you were looking for the police."

"Perhaps," Jean said with the air of someone who believed there was much more to it than that. "But the voice I heard in the hallway before I let him in was exactly that of Jim."

"Coincidence," Marie suggested.

The ash-blonde smiled thinly. "Maybe. But my grandmother would have termed it an act of Lucifer. And until I get a better explanation I'm bound to agree."

She gave a tiny shudder. "You're making me uneasy," she said. "I am going to push your paintings here and I don't want your persistent friend, the devil, working to ruin me."

"At least I'm warning you," Jean had said.

She'd laughed. "Thanks for being so fair. But I'm still going to try and promote the sales of your religious paintings." And she had.

But her venture, judging from the pages of the ledger which she now sat considering, seemed very likely to be doomed by failure. She wasn't ready to put it down to Lucifer's evil influence but the going had been rocky. Unless she had a remarkable upswing of business in the coming weeks she'd have to admit defeat and close the gallery. She felt badly not only for herself but for Jean and the many other artists whose hopes had been pinned to the venture.

She was still studying profit and loss figures and momentarily inspecting the ledger when she heard the floor creak in the gallery outside. The unexpected sound made her turn quickly. And to her consternation someone was standing there in the studio.

"How did you get in here?" she gasped, at once rising.

"You left the door open," the white-haired stranger told her.

Marie looked from the man to the door and saw that it was slightly ajar. She couldn't find any excuse for such negligence but knew she must have made the error or he would not be standing here.

"I can't understand it," she said, still regarding his smiling presence uneasily. "I was positive I'd left it locked."

"But you didn't," he protested mildly. He was a kindly, elderly man with swarthy skin which stood out in contrast against his white hair. Of medium size he was dressed impeccably in a dark suit with a gray waistcoat and in his hand he held a black Homburg and gray gloves.

Still wary, she demanded, "What do you want?"

"I'm sorry to have intruded," he apologized.

Marie stared at him standing there in the soft lighting of the gallery surrounded by paintings on every wall. He seemed to be the complete gentleman despite his unauthorized appearance and his swarthy skin. She still felt she'd locked the gallery against strangers and the discovery she hadn't was upsetting.

Trying to sound cool and collected, she said, "You haven't explained why you have come in on me this way. You know it is far beyond closing time."

"I hoped you would forgive that," he said. His eyes fixed on her in an intense way. Odd eyes that seemed strangely burning.

"I don't receive customers at this hour," she said, unable to resist staring into those weird eyes.

"Of course not," he said in a friendly, cultivated voice that did a lot to dissipate her fears. "I can understand that my unexpected intrusion has upset you but you mustn't be afraid of me. I'm quite a harmless, ordinary man."

And she at once knew this was true. With a small vexed smile she said, "I'm more angry at myself for my neglect than I'm annoyed at you. Or even frightened by you. It is too dangerous in this city to be so careless."

The kindly, white-haired stranger glanced towards the door. "I fully agree." He turned to her again and she saw that his features were strong, with a rather prominent Roman nose, and his eyes had lines and dark shadows under them. Yet the dominant impression was that of a rather handsome aging man. He was in no way feeble or unsteady but a vigorous, late middle-age.

Aware that appearances could be deceiving and anxious to let him know she was expecting someone at any minute, she said, "I was just about to close up. My fiancé will be here soon."

Those strange, knowing eyes twinkled. "Of course an attractive young woman like yourself would be bound to have a young man," he said. "Is the gallery your own project?"

"Yes."

"I think your selection of paintings is excellent," he said, glancing around at the walls. And

with another smile he turned and added, "Especially the three you have on display in the window. The religious paintings by Jean Martin. I have seen her work before. She has great talent."

"I agree," she said.

"Let me give you my card," he said. And reached in his jacket pocket to produce a fat leather wallet from which he extracted one and handed it to her.

She took the card and studied it. In handsome engraving it read: "D. Asmodeus."

"I am Greek by birth but I have lived in this country long enough to consider it my own," he informed her. She raised her eyes from the card to see that he was smiling at her again. He went on, "I have had great business success here and acquired more than modest wealth. I'm a rather lonely man and my chief pleasure has come from my art collection."

"That's very interesting, Mr. Asmodeus," she said quietly.

"And your name is?"

"Marie Holt."

"What made you become an art dealer?"

She smiled wanly. "It was an accident. I was left some unexpected money. I'm a painter myself. I thought it might offer me some security to open a gallery."

He raised his heavy white eyebrows. "And you've found it rewarding?"

"In satisfaction, yes," she said. "In cash, no."

He nodded. "That is not strange. Art is difficult to make pay."

"So I have learned," she said.

He hesitated a moment, studying her. "I see you as a dedicated and ambitious young woman. I'd say you'd sacrifice everything for success in your chosen field."

"I do want to make this place go but it seems doubtful."

The man in the neat black suit and gray waistcoat glanced around the studio again. "There is every reason why you should succeed. You show excellent taste." He moved across to a colorful abstract that hung on the left wall of the gallery. "This one with its broad, parallel bars of color reminds me of the style of Rothko."

"It's by a young man I know," she said, crossing over to stand by Mr. Asmodeus and looking at the brilliant yellow and orange painting with him.

The white-haired man glanced at her. "I believe he was influenced by the paintings of Matisse as Milton Avery surely was."

"That is quite possible," she agreed, impressed by his obvious knowledge of art.

He had moved on to stand before a painting of a brassy, over-weight young woman engaged in intimate conversation with a seedy-looking man, and he nodded at it, "Reminds me of Reginald Marsh."

"I think the girl who did this is very good," she agreed.

Mr. Asmodeus smiled at her in his urbane way. "Marsh had special gifts," he said. "Did you ever study his 'Ten Cents A Dance'? I consider it a masterpiece."

"I've looked at all his things," she said.

The eyes of the man in the neat black suit were fixed on her again. "What type of work do you do?"

"I've concentrated on marines and seascapes of the Maine coast," she told him.

"You prefer places to people, then?"

"As a subject for my art, yes," she said, puzzled by his question.

"I must see some of your work."

"There is one of the Ogunquit scene over there," she said, pointing it out for him. "The bridge at Perkins Cove."

The white-haired man left her to go view the painting at close range. He stood before it for a moment or two before turning to her again. "You have talent, Miss Holt," he said gravely.

She was pleased by this compliment from a man who clearly knew and appreciated art. "Thank you," she said.

"I'd like to buy your painting," he told her.

"Really?" she was delighted.

"Yes. And I want those three in the display window as well. The religious studies of Jean Martin. In fact I'd like to collect her. Give me first offer on anything she sends you."

"That's wonderful!" Marie said, hardly daring to believe her good luck.

Mr. Asmodeus produced his wallet again and from it took a checkbook. "What will the total be on the four paintings?"

She hesitated. It was almost too good to be true. Then she named him a sum in four figures covering the total price. "I'll send you a statement with the price of each painting listed," she promised.

He was writing out the check for her. "Have the paintings delivered to my Long Island home," he said. "You must come out there one day and see my entire collection. I'm on the shore in a fine location."

"I hope you'll be happy with the paintings," she said, still not sure of her good fortune.

He passed the check to her with a smile. "You have my home address on my card. There's no rush about the delivery. Just be sure they're carefully packed and reach me safely."

"Depend on that," she assured him as she studied the check. Then she told him, "This is my largest sale since I opened the gallery. It could mean the difference between success and failure for the project."

The eyes with the dark circles under them burned into her. "I hope I may be able to buy many more things from you," he said. "Now you'll have to put in another window display."

Marie laughed. "You needn't worry about that. I'd be delighted to change the window every hour if it would go on producing sales like this one."

The white-haired Mr. Asmodeus looked pleased. "Well, I really must be on my way," he said, putting his wallet back in his jacket pocket. "I trust your young man arrives soon. And while you're waiting alone be sure and have the door locked properly."

"I will," she said. "And thank you so much."

"I consider I made an excellent purchase," he said. "Remember, I want to see anything else this Jean Martin has to offer. Religious subjects have a special interest for me."

"I'll surely not forget," she promised.

"Goodnight, my dear," he said with a parting smile. "You're a talented young woman. I can promise you have an exciting future in store for you."

"Thank you," she said warmly.

He donned his Homburg and stepped out into the darkness of the sidewalk and vanished. She carefully locked the store door. And it struck her that she had done this earlier although she must have been careless about the latch being in place. Otherwise how could Mr. Asmodeus have gotten in. And hadn't that been a lucky accident!

She was on her way back to the tiny office when a knocking on the door made her turn around and she saw Hugh James standing impatiently at the

glass entrance door to the shop. She went back and opened it for him.

"You arrived just too late to meet my best customer," she told him, holding up the check for him to see. "But then you must have passed him on the street. A white-haired man in dark suit and Homburg. He left only a couple of minutes ago."

Hugh's pleasant young face showed surprise. "There wasn't a soul on the street when I walked down here. No sign of anyone."

CHAPTER TWO

She stared at him with puzzled eyes. "I don't understand it. You must have seen him."

"I was thinking of my own problems," Hugh told her. "I may have missed him. And what are you doing seeing customers at this time of night anyway?"

"I didn't intend to see him. I was outside checking on the window display and when I came back in here I must have left this front entrance door unlocked. He saw the paintings and the lights on inside and came directly in."

Hugh frowned. "That was a dangerous thing to do. I can't understand your being so careless."

"Nor can I," she admitted. "It won't happen again."

"I'd hope not."

"In any case the oversight turned out to be a lucky thing," she said. "I sold him three of Jean Martin's paintings and one of mine."

"Great!" the young man in the gray suit and fawn sport coat said. "Let's go somewhere and have something to eat while you tell me more."

She put out the lights and carefully locked the store. Then they took a cab downtown. She sat close to him in the near darkness of the rear seat thinking of her windfall.

At Fifty-Ninth Street and Park Avenue they left the cab and went into the hotel dining room. It was one of the most popular better spots for a night snack. Hugh waved and smiled at the genial Ernie Warren the band's leader as they passed the orchestra and the tiny square for dancing to be given a table in one of the quiet areas of the attractive room.

George, the captain they knew best, came and took their order. Then Hugh began to question her about her strange customer. She gave him an account of all that had happened. "It will mean I can keep the gallery going," she said happily.

"If the check is good," Hugh said with a hint of jealousy in his manner. "He could have been some kind of faker!"

Distress showed in her lovely gray eyes. "Don't even suggest anything like that!"

"Better be prepared."

"But he was very nice," she protested. "And he

really knows a lot about art. He gave me his address and card. I'm sure the check will be good."

Hugh shrugged. "We'll see. I don't think much of a type that would push his way into a store after hours the way he did."

"I'd left the door open, remember," she apologized for her wealthy customer.

Hugh gave her a sharp look. "He's won you over completely, hasn't he? You think he's great."

"I'm glad he bought four paintings from me," she said. "Is there anything wrong about that?"

"I don't know yet," the young man said moodily. "Tomorrow I'll look up some information on your benefactor the eminent Mr. D. Asmodeus. We'll see what I find out."

"He's wealthy and an art patron," she said. "You make that sound like some kind of crime."

"Just wait until we know more," Hugh told her. "You're not usually so impressed by strangers. I can't understand it."

"Mr. Asmodeus is different. He's such a kindly man," she enthused.

"I wonder," was her fiancé's glum comment.

The evening didn't go too well for them. Hugh saw her to the door of her apartment and she was glad when the time came for their goodnight kiss. Talking to him in his cynical mood had been a strain. She wasn't going to lose faith in her newfound rich patron and she didn't want to hear Hugh's complaints about him. They parted with Hugh promising to drop by the gallery at lunch

hour to inform her what he'd been able to discover about the mysterious Mr. Asmodeus.

She was weary and after taking the check from her purse and reading it for perhaps the tenth time she prepared for bed. She was normally a sound sleeper but the night's events had left her in a highly nervous state and this was reflected in her inability to get to sleep. She tossed and turned, staring up at the darkness and seeing the amiable hawk face and burning eyes of Mr. Asmodeus. It seemed his features were etched on her mind.

Around three o'clock she finally slept through utter exhaustion. And then it was a sleep troubled by phantom nightmares. She imagined herself in a dark tunnel that seemed to lead endlessly to nowhere. In the shadows around her macabre laughter echoed as she ran along, stumbling and sometimes falling on the hard surface of the tunnel. Then she was attacked by giant, hairy scorpions which tumbled from a ledge above her. The ugly things dropped down on her and she tried to fight them off, sobbing out her terror at the same time!

Next at a distant opening at the end of the tunnel Mr. Asmodeus appeared. The white-haired man came walking towards her with a smirk on his hawk face. She called out to him for help in her torment but he merely laughed and stood there studying her with those burning eyes. One of the scorpions became entangled in her hair and she screamed as she tried to get rid of it.

She screamed again as she woke to a gray and

uneasy dawn. Then she sank back on her pillow with a gasp of dismay knowing it had all been an unpleasant nightmare. Induced by Hugh's tormenting her about Mr. Asmodeus. It was all too ridiculous. She had no need to worry. The check would be good!

But she lost no time getting to the bank on her way to the gallery later in the morning. And there was no problem at all. The check was good and she had the money deposited to her account. Then filled with satisfaction she went on to open the gallery. When Hugh arrived at noon she'd be able to tell him she had the money no matter what he had to tell her about the mysterious millionaire.

She tried to reach Jean Martin on the phone but there was no reply. So she decided to try and call her again in the early afternoon to inform her of the sale of three of her paintings. Marie spent the morning removing the three religious paintings from the window and substituting them with others from the fairly large collection she'd assembled. After that there was the problem of packing the fairly large paintings and calling a delivery service to take them out to Long Island.

Mr. Asmodeus had mentioned that his home was in a fashionable section of the shore area. She could almost picture the kind of mansion it would be and the richness of his art collection. It made her angry that Hugh should be so juvenile as to be jealous of this new friend of hers. Particularly since the millionaire had been so nice and taken

such an interest in her and her work. And he was old enough to be her father.

Madison Avenue presented a different picture in the daytime. It teemed with people and traffic. Marie was pleased to note that a number of the passers-by paused to look briefly in at the paintings on display. And a little after one a gray-suited Hugh James suddenly appeared in the entrance-way and came in to join her. She met him in the middle of the small gallery and knew by the smug expression on his pleasant face he had dug up some information on Asmodeus.

Before he could say anything, she informed him, "You needn't have worried about the check. It was as good as gold!"

Hugh looked at her bleakly. "I wish I could say the same thing about Mr. Asmodeus."

"I'm sure he's a fine gentleman," she said stubbornly.

"He has plenty of money if that's all that worries you."

"Well, then?"

Hugh said, "Aren't you curious about how he makes it?"

"No."

"You should be. A lot of people are."

"I'm not a lot of people."

Hugh shook his head. "He's really swept you off your feet, hasn't he?"

"That's crazy talk!"

"I don't think so. I've never known you to de-

fend anyone the way you do him and without really knowing anything about him."

"I found him a gentleman and that's all I care about!"

"I see," he said grimly. "It may interest you to learn your patron has a very shadowy background. A few years ago he emerged from nowhere with a lot of European bank credits."

"Is there anything wrong in that?"

"No. But since then he's been alleged to be the head of an illegal munitions ring. He works through a company in Switzerland. They've specialized in providing arms to African countries and South American revolutionaries, managed a few interesting transactions in the Middle East."

She frowned. "So he's a businessman!"

"Dealing in death," was her fiance's bitter reply. "I understand the U.S. authorities are keeping a close watch on him. Soon they're liable to clamp down on his illegal deals. So you'd better watch out!"

Marie was hurt and angry. "I'm not worried."

"You should be. I wouldn't even want to sell paintings to anyone like that. It could mean your being questioned later and your name involved with his in the headlines."

"That could be very good for the gallery," she said with false assurance. She wasn't going to let him see he'd upset her.

The young man eyed her with despair. "I've

gone to all this trouble to look Asmodeus up and this is the thanks I get for it."

"I didn't ask you to do it," she said defiantly.

"I wanted to for your protection," Hugh said. "Better be warned."

"I'd say you were being childish about this!"

Hugh showed signs of anger. "I've told you what the score is. Do what you like about it." He turned and strode out slamming the door after him.

Marie stood watching him mingle and disappear in the passing noon-hour parade. There were tears in her eyes and a look of unhappiness on her lovely face. She cared a great deal for him and quarreling was the last thing she wanted. It was stupid of him to be so unreasonable. Even unfair. She turned and went back to her desk to sit in a mood of utter despair.

It was while she was seated there the phone rang. And when she answered it she at once recognized the smooth voice of Mr. Asmodeus on the line. "How are you making out packing my paintings?" he enquired genially.

"Very well," she said. "They'll probably go out in the delivery tomorrow morning."

"There's no hurry," he assured her. "I didn't call about that. I have another problem."

"Yes?" she asked warily, wondering what it might be.

"I want you to do me a favor."

"I will if I can," she said cautiously.

"You can manage this one," he assured her. "I have a young man in my employ who fancies himself as an artist. He does have talent but he paints strange studies which no one will buy. He is becoming very discouraged. I'm sending him over to your gallery with one of his paintings. I'll buy it from you anonymously later. I don't want him to find that out. In the meantime I'd like to have you display it in your window for a few days. Just to buttress his ego and give him the courage to continue painting."

She listened with interest and some amazement. Then she said, "I think it a generous gesture on your part. But it's difficult for me to say whether I can place the painting in my window or not without having seen it or knowing anything about the artist's talent."

"It is a good work of art but unusual," the millionaire assured her. "You won't hurt your reputation at all by featuring it and you will be doing me a favor which I'll surely return."

She hesitated. "When will he come here?"

"He's on his way there now with the painting," he informed her.

She was startled. "I'll do what Ican."

"I know you won't fail me," Mr. Asmodeus said and hung up.

She put down the phone and stared at it with some amazement. She'd not expected to hear from the mysterious millionaire so soon again. Nor had

she been prepared for such an unusual request on his part. Certainly he was an eccentric. Used to getting his own way however unreasonable it might be. Yet perhaps she would be wise to humor him since he could be her financial salvation.

It was while she was ruminating on these things the door of the gallery opened. She turned to see a thin, very nervous Chinese in an ill-fitting suit and with a battered soft hat perched on his head standing there. He had a large painting wrapped with corrugated box under his arm. He put it down and beamed at her through dark-rimmed heavy glasses.

"You are Miss Holt?" he asked, hissing extravagantly on the 'Miss' and bowing politely.

She got up and went to greet him. "Yes," she said. "And you are?"

"Tom Cheng," he said. "I have a painting I would like to leave with you for sale."

"I see," she said carefully. "I normally seek out my paintings. But if you have something of interest I may be able to handle it."

The thin Chinese looked very grave. "Subject is of great interest," he told her. "You will see." And he began to take the cardboard off it.

As he worked, she asked him, "Where is your studio? I don't believe I've ever heard your name mentioned."

Tom Cheng kept busy and answered without looking up, "I have come to city only recently," he said. Then taking the cardboard from the painting

he held it up for her to study. "You see!" he said with a delighted smile on his sallow, hollow-cheeked face.

For a stunned moment she could say nothing. It was a painting of a monster! A monster standing on the sidewalk before a dilapidated poolroom with dirty windows and a number of crumpled signs in them. The number of the building was 179 and showed on the poolroom door. But it was the monster itself that she found shocking in the drab brown painting.

She said, "It's most unusual."

The thin Tom Cheng gazed at the painting with the admiration of a creator. "Is my own work," he informed her, leaning heavily on the 'is' again so that it sounded like 'issss'!

She said, "What kind of creature is that standing there?"

The sallow face with the horn-rimmed glasses radiated pride. "Is part of nightmare," he said.

"I can well believe that," she agreed. For the thing he had painted standing before the poolroom looking angry was a bird the size of a human with the head and horns of a rhinoceros and a crow's tail.

"Crow's tail is messenger of death," the Chinese told her.

It was a horror of a painting and yet she knew that it showed talent. And for some weird reason she could not guess it had a great fascination for her. The more she studied it the more she was

compelled to admit that it had originality, excellent craftsmanship and macabre appeal.

Tom Cheng was peering at her anxiously through his thick glasses. "You will place in window for sale?"

She was staring at the painting. And it seemed to her that it could do no harm to display it. Surely it would attract extra interest from the passers-by. She nodded to the thin, anxious little man. "Yes. It can go in the window."

"It is good," Tom Cheng hissed happily and at once went over to the window. He removed a still life of red apples on a black background and lovingly placed his monster in its place. Then he brought the other painting back to her, bowed again and said, "Most delightful occasion!" And with that he turned and left the gallery.

She stood there hardly believing it had happened. It all had the quality of a weird dream. The unexpected phone call from the mysterious Mr. Asmodeus, the odd request he'd made, the appearance of the eccentric Tom Cheng and the utterly monstrous painting which now was on display in her window. Already some people were pausing to stare in at it and register incredulity.

Marie turned and went back to her office. She hardly understood why she'd gone along with the millionaire's unusual request. She didn't even want to think about it. At the worst it would do no harm. But then she imagined what comments Hugh James would have to make about the mon-

ster painting when he saw it. She knew it would be a difficult moment.

To get her mind off this she put in another phone call to Jean Martin. And this time the artist answered the phone. "Yes?" she said in her familiar soft voice.

"It's Marie Holt," she told her. "I have some wonderful news for you. I sold three of your paintings."

"Oh?" Jean Martin sounded surprised but not too happy.

"Don't you know what that means?" Marie demanded. "It means money for both of us. Money we badly need."

"Of course," the artist agreed. "Who did you sell them to and when?"

"To a new customer last night. He bought one of mine as well. It's a long story. Why don't I come down with your check this evening and have dinner with you?"

"I'd like that," Jean Martin said. "I'm working so we can cook something here in the studio. That way we'll save time."

"Whatever you like," Marie said. "And this customer wants more of your work. In fact I think he'll buy anything you have for sale."

There was a hesitation at the other end of the line. "I'm not positive I'd want to sell all my work to one party," the artist worried.

"We can talk about that later," Marie said, not understanding the other girl's attitude.

So it was settled she'd go down to the studio in the village for dinner. Meanwhile the day went by in a most interesting manner. Literally dozens of people paused at the window to stare or glare at the painting of the monster. And a good percentage of them came into the gallery to ask questions about the painting and the other work on display.

To Marie's utter surprise these talks led to two relatively good sales. One to a stout, overbearing woman with a poodle on a leash and a chauffeur in tow to cart off the painting of a bullfight scene. And the other to a squat, swarthy man who spoke poor English and insisted on buying one of Marie's Maine seascapes.

When it was time to close the store she did so with a feeling of satisfaction. Her meeting with the mysterious Mr. Amodeus had surely changed her luck. Money was literally flowing in where there had been none before. She walked to the subway and took it down to East Village. It was only a short walk to Jean's studio. She went up the dark stairway and rapped on the door.

After a moment Jean, with palette and brush still in hand, came to let her in. "You're early," the attractive female artist said.

"I got a train right away," Marie said, moving over to the canvas that Jean was working on. "What's this?" she asked.

Jean stood beside her with a grim smile. "Red Sea and The Israelites," she informed her. "I've been wanting to do this one for a long while."

"It should be great," Marie said. And she took the check she'd made out for the artist's share of the sale of the three paintings and passed it to her. "How does that make you feel?"

"Wary," the ash-blonde girl said studying the check. "I had a strange dream last night."

"What has a dream got to do with it?"

Jean smiled wanly. "Make yourself comfortable and I'll tell you."

Marie settled down on a divan near the easel and the skylight under which Jean worked. The big studio with its beamed ceilings, large area of living space and its walls hung with paintings always gave her a feeling of relaxation. At a sideboard in a far corner of the room Jean made them martinis.

"You haven't told me about your dream," Marie said, somewhat let down that her friend had not been more thrilled by the sales of her work.

"I'm going to order our drinks," the artist said.

"I think it's wonderful I've found you a patron with money," Marie went on. "It's what you've needed."

Jean came over with the martinis and some cheese on a tray and set it on the coffee table by the divan. Then she took the chair opposite Marie and balanced a martini thoughtfully in a slim hand.

The artist gave Marie a searching look. "Just what sort of man is this Mr. Asmodeus?"

"A pleasant, middle-aged man with a rather charming manner."

Jean frowned. "What does he look like? Describe his face."

Marie stared at her in mild amazement. "Well, his skin in swarthy and he has white hair. His nose is on the large side and his face is lined impressively and there are heavy dark circles under his eyes."

The other girl sipped her martini. "Does he live near the ocean?"

"I told you he does. I'm sure I mentioned it on the phone. He has a house on the Long Island shore."

"You didn't say anything about it on the phone," Jean said quietly, her eyes troubled.

"What difference does it make where he lives?" she asked, not able to hide the fact her friend's manner was vexing her.

"In my dream there was a man in a house by the sea," Jean told her very seriously. "A man who had drowned and come to life again. He stood on his patio in the sunlight with seaweed draped around his shoulders. It glistened in the sun."

Marie frowned. "What can your dream fantasies have to do with Mr. Asmodeus?"

"Because in my dream this man, who looked exactly like the person you've described, had bought all my pictures and hung them in his living room. I walked around the room with him and saw every important piece of work I'd ever done."

"And?"

"And then he turned to me with a weird smile and said something in a tongue I couldn't understand. From outside there was a roar of advancing waves and a moment later the ocean came pouring into the living room. The man stood there taunting me and laughing maniacally as I screamed and begged him to save my paintings. But he wouldn't listen to me and soon the ocean water was above my head and I was drowning with my paintings lost!"

Marie stared at her. "It's the kind of nightmare that must have been terribly vivid," she was quick to agree. "I can see that it would bother anyone. But you can't confuse it with real life. Allow it to spoil this wonderful chance you have to sell your work to Mr. Asmodeus."

The other girl studied her over her half-empty martini glass. "But I see a similarity between my dream and what has happened. You say this man wants to buy all my paintings. Perhaps he wants to do it merely to destroy them. To make my work count for nothing."

"That's ridiculous!" Marie protested.

"I don't know," Jean Martin worried.

"Can you afford not to sell your paintings to him? Can you go on without money?"

"No," the ash-blonde girl admitted reluctantly.

Marie smiled at her. "Then forget your silly dream and allow me to handle the business details.

I'll need a half-dozen more of your paintings at once. We can decide which ones before I leave."

Jean sighed. "It will be wonderful to have steady money coming in. To know there is someone who will buy whatever I paint."

"Consider yourself lucky."

"I suppose I should," the other girl said with a troubled smile.

"Of course you'll want to meet Mr. Asmodeus and I'll arrange that," Marie promised.

A look of panic crossed the face of Jean. "No! Please! I'd rather not be involved personally. I have no wish to meet him. You can act as go-between without any meeting being necessary."

Marie stared at the attractive girl. She'd never thought of her as a neurotic before but she was surely exhibiting signs of being one now. She said, "If you like it that way. I know you'd enjoy him. He's charming."

"I'll take your word for it," Jean told her. "Let things stay as they are."

The time went by quickly. Jean prepared a simple salad dinner for them and they discussed the latest shows and decided on the paintings Jean would have sent to the gallery. At last it was time for Marie to leave and the ash-blonde saw her to the street door.

Standing in the cool night air of the East Village street Jean went back to the subject of her earlier worries. Looking directly at Marie, she

said, "If I should decide not to sell any more paintings to your Mr. Asmodeus would you hate me?"

She laughed lightly. "Nothing would make me hate you. I might find it hard to understand of course."

"It's probably nothing we'll ever have to worry about," Jean said. "But I do want the privilege of refusing a sale if I decide on it."

"You'll always have that right," she assured her.

Framed in the doorway of the ancient red brick building the ash-blonde looked grateful. "Thank you, Marie," she said sincerely. "You have been wonderful for me and I do appreciate it. Forgive me for not being very thankful."

"Don't worry about it," Marie said, touched by the other girl's words.

Jean looked grave. "I worry about you. Be careful."

"Of course I'll be careful," she said, not fully understanding what the girl meant. "Don't forget to send me the paintings."

"I won't," Jean promised.

With that they parted. On the subway ride uptown Jean considered the evening she'd spent with her friend and client. It was impossible not to face the fact that Jean's attitude had been strange. There had been a brooding fear in the girl's manner she couldn't understand. It seemed especially unfortunate now that Mr. Asmodeus was so anxious to promote Jean's reputation as an artist.

It was a several block walk from the uptown subway stop nearest her apartment. She made her way up the steep steps to the darkness and cool fresh air of the spring night. The area she had to cross was quiet and residential. But she did not mind being alone. She'd often walked these streets without having any unpleasant experiences.

She walked briskly along the apartment-lined streets with her mind still occupied by the discussion with Jean and the strangeness of it all. She wished that Hugh was available to talk to about it. But she had no idea where to reach him and he was also in an ugly mood about her dealings with Asmodeus. Why did everyone distrust the pleasant, aging man when she found him so appealing?

She halted at an intersection for a car to pass and it was then that she suddenly had the feeling she was being followed. It sent a chill of fear through her but she crossed the street quickly without glancing back. As she moved at a fast pace along the sidewalk she was again overwhelmed by a certainty there was someone trailing her. She could almost count out the footsteps following her.

Her heart began to beat more rapidly as she strove to control her fears. She was still almost a full block from the door of her apartment building and the street was deserted. Panic built up in her as she hurried along and in a wan hope that her imagination had been playing tricks on her, she decided to give a quick look over her shoulder.

She did and instead of finding relief in the fact she wasn't being pursued by anyone she was terrified to discover there was actually a shadowy, thin figure behind her.

CHAPTER THREE

The certain knowledge that she was being followed made Marie abandon any pretense of casualness. She at once broke into a running pace that landed her breathless but secure in the vestibule of her brownstone apartment building. Only when she was safe inside did she peer out through the glass panel of the door to see what had happened to her pursuer.

Now the blurred figure came along in the near darkness and she watched with fiercely beating heart as it proceeded on its way past the apartment building. She gave a tiny gasp of surprise as the glow from a nearby street lamp briefly illuminated the face of the thin man and she saw it was the Chinese artist, Tom Cheng!

Watching him vanish on down the street she wondered whether he had followed her deliberately or if by some weird coincidence he had happened to be coming along the same way. It seemed that the latter was at least a possibility since he'd made no attempt to follow her into the apartment. She let herself in the inner hallway and went upstairs feeling rather foolish. Jean's morbid talk had infected her so that she'd been in a mood to lose her head over nothing.

Next morning she packed the paintings and had the delivery service pick them up. It was a bright, fine day with lots of people strolling along Madison Avenue and once again the ugly monster painting by Tom Cheng attracted a lot of attention and brought her several sales. The strange thing about it was that no one seemed ready to buy the ugly creation of artist Cheng though its unusual nature was what attracted them to the other offerings in the gallery.

The people who came in to buy paintings also puzzled her. They were not the type you'd expect to find in an art gallery. One of them was a bent, crone dressed in shabby black and with a worn fox fur draped around her neck. She had small, glittering eyes which kept darting glances at Marie as she discussed the various offerings. The old woman selected a lush drawing of a large black cat purring contentedly on a red silk pillow.

The old woman gave her an address in the

upper Eight Eighties to which the painting was to be sent and told her, "I have a weakness for black cats, young woman."

"I hope you enjoy this one," Marie said.

The glittering eyes in the deepset sockets studied her. "Indeed I shall," the old woman said with a dry cackle of laughter.

Not long after this rather strange customer had gone, Marie sold a study of a nude young woman on a sandy beach to a tall, rather ominous-looking man with dark glasses and iron gray hair. There was little about him to suggest his calling as he wore a dark raincoat over black suit and black turtle-neck sweater. He had a cultured voice and a nervous manner.

"If you'll wrap it for me I'll take it along under my arm," he told her as he paid her in cash for the painting.

"It won't take a minute to get it ready," she assured him. And as she placed brown paper over the painting, she asked, "Have you been by here before?"

"Many times," the thin, gaunt man with the dark glasses said, "but never until today when I saw that unusual study in your window did I think of stopping."

She smiled at him as she worked. "It's strange but the same thing has happened with a number of people. My sales in the gallery have rocketed yet no one has purchased the monster painting."

The tall man eyed her with cool disinterest. "I should say it does its work by merely attracting attention to your other things."

"That is true," she agreed.

"If I were you I wouldn't change your window display," the tall man with the dark glasses advised her. "I'd leave that painting in there."

"I intend to," she said. "I promised one of my customers that I would." And she finished with the painting wrapped and gave it to him.

"I'll be back again for some other study one of these days," the tall man promised as he left with the painting under his arm.

The customers were not run-of-the-mill types. There was no question about that. She'd never had people like them in her gallery before or indeed, seen people like this in any gallery. But they seemed ready enough to buy and had the money to pay cash. What more could she ask? The monster painting had been a good luck charm.

The six new paintings arrived from Jean Martin's studio in the late afternoon. She carefully unpacked them and as she set them out on the floor with their frames leaning on the wall she was pleased with what she saw. There was no question of the blonde girl's talent. These Biblical scenes embraced a number of subjects from young King David, an imaginative portrait, to a modern depiction of the "Annunciation." Marie was certain Mr. Asmodeus would purchase these without hesita-

tion. They were as good as the original three, perhaps even better.

It was while she was finding places on the walls of the gallery for these studies that she received a phone call from a rather sheepish and repentant Hugh James. The young man appeared anxious to patch up their quarrel.

"How about my coming by to pick you up for dinner and a movie?" he asked. "I'll come directly after I leave the office. No need for us to dress up and we can be home early."

"I'd like that," she'd agreed. "There's a movie on Fifty-Seventh Street I'd like to see. At the Carnegie."

"We'll have dinner at the Tea Room to make it handy," Hugh said. "I'll come by about five-thirty."

And he did. But first he lingered on the street to study her window display with a stunned expression on his pleasant young face. When he entered the gallery, he said, "Aren't you going in for a new line of art?"

She smiled. "You mean my monster painting? Isn't it great!"

"It's horrible," he sputtered. "How can you expect to sell anything if you feature a repulsive thing like that?"

Marie gave him a triumphant look. "Since I've put it in the window I've sold nearly a dozen paintings!"

"No one has bought that awful one!"

"But it brought the people in."

"They must be crazy then," Hugh said in disgust.

"All cash customers!" she declared proudly.

Hugh studied her with uncertainty. "Where did you get it?"

"The artist is a Chinese. A friend of Mr. Asmodeus. It was Mr. Asmodeus who asked me to feature it in my window. And it has turned out wonderfully well."

The young man frowned. "I'd much prefer to see some of Jean Martin's Biblical studies there."

"Mr. Asmodeus bought them all. I have a new lot for him to see now."

"It seems to me your millionaire friend is taking over the policy of this gallery," Hugh said with some exasperation.

"Now you're being small-minded and jealous," she accused him. "Mr. Asmodeus is a harmless old man who simply wants to help me."

"What does Jean make of all this sudden interest in her work?"

Marie hesitated to tell him the mixed reception she'd had from the artist. Instead, she said, "It's a wonderful opportunity for her. She's very pleased about the money."

Hugh sighed. "I can see that your millionaire patron has you nicely packaged and in his pocket."

"Let's not spoil dinner by harping on that," she

told him. "I've had a very profitable day and now I want to enjoy the evening."

Which was what they did. Dinner was pleasant and the movie amusing. Hugh lost his jealous mood and it was almost like old times. She was careful to avoid any mention of Mr. Asmodeus and this helped. But as they were leaving the theatre after the early movie they were suddenly confronted by the dapper, aging millionaire.

Recognizing her, a smile crossed his swarthy face and he halted on the Seventh Avenue sidewalk to greet them. "Good evening, Miss Holt," he said in his gracious way as the three of them stood a small island amid the passing crowds. "I didn't expect to meet you so soon again."

"It is a pleasant surprise for me," Marie told him with a smile. "This is my fiancé, Hugh James."

The dark-circled eyes of the white-haired man studied Hugh as he shook hands with him and said, "You are a very lucky young man."

Somewhat flustered, Hugh said, "Thank you. Marie has mentioned you to me many times."

"How flattering for me," Mr. Asmodeus said with that mocking gleam in his eyes. She saw that he was wearing a dark cape and carrying a cane and under the cape he had on a dinner jacket and black tie. "I have just come from the Opera," he said. "A performance of 'Faust'. One of my favor-

ites but I prefer only the first act. The second part I find most depressing."

Marie smiled. "You mean after the young man sells his soul to the devil and atones for it."

"Exactly," the striking-looking man in the black cape said. "I think from then on the opera has no suspense or drama. So I simply leave the theatre at that point and stroll the city streets. I find it much more entertaining."

Hugh's smile was bleak, "And you'll encounter many more people who have sold their souls to the devil. It might be interesting to speculate about some of the faces."

Mr. Asmodeus regarded him benignly. "I can see why you appeal to this dear child," he said. "You have certain qualities of perception that are rare. You both must come out to my Long Island place and see my collection of paintings."

"Thank you," Hugh said in a reserved tone.

Marie spoke up, "I have six more Jean Martin canvases. And they are fine."

Mr. Asmodeus arched his distinguished white eyebrows. "Excellent," he told her. "I'll be in touch with you tomorrow and arrange to see them."

She smiled and said, "I've had good luck with Mr. Cheng's monster."

"You put it in the window as I asked you?" the man in the black cape said.

"Yes. And it has brought me an almost steady stream of customers."

The aging man looked pleased. "Cheng has a certain talent. It was kind of you to do me such a favor."

"It's been helpful for me," she said. "Though I haven't sold the painting."

"Don't!" Mr. Asmodeus cautioned her. "It is not for sale. I wish to buy it. Cheng has a talent for depicting these weird creatures. His studies have a kind of fascination for me."

Hugh gave him a bleak smile. "As grotesque as some of the faces of the city streets."

"Exactly," the man in the black cloak said. "And I have a taste for the bizarre and ugly. Something one acquires." He smiled in his urbane way. "But I mustn't keep you any longer. So nice meeting you both." He bowed and went striding on among the motley Seventh Avenue crowds.

Hugh took a deep breath as he glanced after him with an expression of distaste on his pleasant face. "So that is your wonderful Mr. Asmodeus!"

"What's wrong with him?" she demanded indignantly as she held onto his arm.

Hugh gave her a tormenting smile. "Nothing. Only he looks his type. The benign white-haired old gentleman whose hands are stained with the blood-profits from illegal munitions sales."

"I won't have you talking that way!"

"It's where his money comes from," Hugh reminded her.

"You can't know for certain!" she protested.

"That's the story I was told."

"And that's probably what it is. Just a story!"

So the evening ended with Mr. Asmodeus prominent in their conversation after all. Hugh took her back to her apartment and stayed for coffee and a snack. She again tried to avoid the millionaire in their talk and though she succeeded she knew the impact of their meeting with him still dominated their thoughts. Hugh reminded her they had a double-date with one of his office associates and his girl-friend for the following evening. They kissed goodnight and tried to pretend everything was the same as it had always been. But she knew this wasn't so.

That the advent of Mr. Asmodeus had changed things a good deal was made apparent the next day. In the mid-afternoon she received a phone call from the urbane, white-haired man. And he said, "I'd like to visit the gallery about nine this evening. I hate to make you open it after hours but I have so little free time during the day. And I do want to see the new Jean Martin paintings."

Marie hesitated. There was that double date with Hugh and his friends. But she knew she'd have no trouble making a decision. It was more important for her to be at the gallery. Hugh could make some excuse to the others and she'd see him later.

So she told the millionaire, "I'll be glad to come back tonight."

"Fine," he said. "I'll be there. Promptly at nine."

As soon as she finished this conversation she put through a call to Hugh at his office and explained what had happened. She ended with, "So I won't be able to make it tonight."

Hugh sounded outraged at the other end of the line. "You can't stand me up this way before my friends!"

"They should understand. I have a business here."

"And the business comes first it seems," Hugh said angrily.

"I have others besides myself to consider," she reminded him. "Jean is depending on my selling her paintings."

"That's a fine excuse," Hugh grumbled. "I'm not pleased about this."

"We can meet later," she suggested. "Just the two of us."

"No thanks," Hugh snapped from the other end of the line. "You want the evening for yourself you can have all of it for yourself. I'll find another date." And he slammed down the phone.

She sighed. She'd hoped to avoid another quarrel but it didn't seem possible. Hugh was so touchy these days. Things were slower at the gallery during the afternoon though she did make a single sale. This was to a very attractive girl who spoke of herself as being a model. At first she was anxious to buy the Cheng painting but Marie explained it wasn't for sale.

"It has been spoken for by a Mr. Asmodeus," she told the girl.

The attractive brunette recognized the name at once. "He is a good friend of mine," she said. "I can understand why the painting appeals to him."

Marie was interested. "That's amazing. That you should know Mr. Asmodeus."

The girl smiled. "He's a very old friend."

"He seems a wonderful man."

"There's scarcely anything he can't do if he decides on it," the lovely girl said. "Your association with him should be valuable to you."

"I think it has been," Marie agreed.

The brunette studied the various paintings and halted before those done by Jean Martin with a look of grim amusement. "Has Mr. Asmodeus seen these?"

"He's already bought some Biblical scenes. And he's coming to look at them tonight."

"I'm sure they'll bring a reaction from him," the lovely model said. "You have a painting of Diana, the Moon-Goddess, on the other wall. I'll take that."

Marie went to get the painting which was done in tones of purple, black and pale blue. "It's very good."

"We can't let our friend, Mr. Asmodeus, have all the good ones," the girl said, digging in her purse for the money to pay for the painting.

She took the girl's address and arranged to send her the painting. It struck her that the model was

an unusual type. Extremely personable and flamboyant. But then most of the young women in that demanding work were strongly individualistic. She glanced at the card with the girl's name and address. She must ask the millionaire about this Helen Beacon.

She went home at five-thirty and prepared a small meal for herself. Then she changed into a rather chic gray outfit which she thought would be nice for her evening interview with Mr. Asmodeus. If he proved as interested in this new lot of paintings she would make a neat sum of money for both Jean Martin and herself from the hour or so at the gallery. She couldn't imagine why Hugh James wasn't more conscious of this side of things rather than making her miserable about it.

While she was still at the apartment thunder began to rumble ominously in the background. So that when she walked back along Madison to the gallery she wore a light raincoat and carried an umbrella against the possible storm. She'd no sooner arrived at the gallery than the storm burst. The lightning was sharp, the thunder frightening and huge sheets of rain came down at short intervals. It was a miserable night.

Marie stood in the shadowed gallery and stared out at the street wondering if Mr. Asmodeus would show up in the storm. Every so often she would see scurrying figures with and without umbrellas. And once two teen-age girls, giggling and screaming, took refuge in the shop entrance from

the rain. They remained there until the shower subsided and then dashed out into the darkness again.

She moved closer to the glass door to watch the storm. Each time the sharp, blue flash of lightning pierced the canyon of Madison Avenue she involuntarily flinched. And once she glanced at the window as the lightning came and was fascinated by the way it lighted up the painting of the monster by the odd Cheng. This made her think of the night he'd followed her home either by accident or plan. What a strange person he was!

There was an extra bright flash of lightning and with it the raincaped figure of Mr. Asmodeus appeared, highlighted for an instant in the weird blue glare. He proved that he was not bothered by the storm since his impressive, lined face revealed a smile. Marie hastily unlocked the door and let him in as the avenue echoed with majestic thunder.

Stepping inside the millionaire said, "I worried that you might not be here."

She smiled wanly. "I was thinking the same thing about you."

He chuckled. "Storms of this sort give me pleasure. What is more thrilling than to see the elements in fury? It makes me think of the clash between the powers of Heaven and Hell."

"I'm afraid such a storm just leaves me frightened without any such grand thoughts," she confessed.

Mr. Asmodeus swung off his wet cloak. "We'll

not worry about the storm," he said. "I want to look at those paintings."

"They're over here," she said, leading him to them and turning on the gallery lights to their full strength so he could see them better.

The white-haired man stood before the half-dozen Jean Martin canvases with a rapt expression on his swarthy, hawk face. "Amazing!" he exclaimed. "The girl never runs out of subjects."

Marie smiled. "She gave credit to a stern, God-fearing grandmother who drilled the Bible into her. These scenes she portrays are living and unforgettable to her."

"They have to be!" he agreed with admiration. Then he turned to her, "Of course I'll take them all. I want to buy everything she does. Don't worry about price. Just bill my office for whatever the total is."

"You're very generous," she said, excited by the sale.

He shook his head. "No. I consider this a worthwhile investment. I'm actually hard-headed about such matters. I pride myself that I first discovered and bought the abstracts of Litvine. He became famous. You know of him, of course."

"I've seen his things in the museums," Marie said, recalling the artist who'd briefly known fame and painted extravagant abstracts in fantastic colors. "I don't think there can be many of his paintings in private collections."

The white-haired man smiled at her knowingly.

"You are mistaken there. I have the largest group of his paintings anywhere. The museums have only a few and paid much more for them. My selection of his work could bring me a fortune if I put them on the market."

Marie frowned. "He became famous and then tragedy struck him."

"Yes," the millionaire agreed. "Unfortunate for the poor fellow. But since there will be no more of his paintings the ones I own went up greatly in value."

She said, "Didn't he murder his wife?"

Mr. Asmodeus nodded. "Unfortunate business and then he tried to kill himself and made a bad job of it."

"He's still alive isn't he?" she asked nervously as the thunder rolled loudly again.

"Yes. In a state insane asylum. Hopelessly mad," the millionaire said. "He'll never paint again."

Marie shuddered. "How awful!"

"These things happen," Mr. Asmodeus said with a wise look on his lined face.

It struck her that there was no regret in his tone. No sympathy for the unhappy artist whom he'd been discussing. And she began to wonder if she really understood this stranger who had come to her out of the darkness to so generously support her gallery. Did he have some ulterior motive in collecting the Jean Martin canvases so greedily?

Remembering the unhappy frame of mind Jean

had revealed when she'd last been with her, Marie felt she should warn the eccentric millionaire that he might not be able to purchase all the blonde girl's paintings.

Outside the gallery the rain was coming down in torrents. Hesitantly she told the white-haired man, "There is one thing. I'm not sure I can get you any more of the Jean Martin paintings. At least not right away."

He lifted his eyebrows. "Why not?"

"She doesn't seem to want her things all owned by one collector."

"Why should she mind that?"

Marie shrugged. "I can't explain it. But that's what she intimated to me when I last talked with her."

The burning eyes of the millionaire fixed on her in a hypnotic fashion. "I'm positive you can persuade her to change her mind about that. If it's money I'm willing to pay her more."

"I don't think it's money," Marie faltered.

"You will be able to manage her," Dr. Asmodeus said confidently. "She'll not feel like turning down all this extra cash."

"Perhaps not," she said. "I just felt I should warn you."

"I'm certainly appreciative that you did," he assured her. "And there is one other thing. I'd like you to accept another painting or two from Cheng."

Marie at once felt uneasy. She didn't mind

displaying the one monstrosity in her window but more of them could prove embarrassing. She said, "The work he does is so unusual I think handling extra paintings might throw the gallery off balance."

"Not at all," he said urbanely. "By your own admission Cheng's painting has brought you in a wealth of business. Why shouldn't a full window display of his work increase your prosperity?"

"It would be too bizarre," she protested. "His subject matter is grotesque."

"We live in a world of horror and twisted creatures," the white-haired man said calmly. "His are not all that far from reality. Especially if you see them as portraits of what we chose to call souls."

Marie was upset by his words. "You're very cynical!"

"I would rather you called me a realist, my dear," Mr. Asmodeus said with a grim smile.

"Is it very important to you that I display Cheng's paintings?"

"Very."

She stared at the swarthy, hawk face. "I don't mean to pry but I would like to know why."

"Cheng is a faithful worker on my behalf."

"I see."

"I know that his art means a great deal to him and I feel obligated to assist him in gaining an audience," the millionaire said. "Since you will also gain financially by cooperating I don't see that any of us lose."

"His work is not a good example of the kind of paintings I have to sell," she pointed out. "It does not reflect ny personal taste. And I think the canvases in a gallery should."

Mr. Asmodeus smiled at her in an understanding manner. "I can sympathize with your qualms. But I assure you there is no reason for you to feel doubts about showing Cheng's paintings. I expect him to be famous one day soon."

She swallowed hard, knowing that she would give in to him. He was much too clever for her. And yet she felt she had to tell him some of the things that were troubling her about Cheng. She said, "The other night someone followed me home from the subway station. When I reached my apartment building I looked out to see who it was. And it was Cheng."

Mr. Asmodeus showed amazement. "I find that hard to believe. Are you sure it was Cheng? Did you get a close look at him?"

"No," she was forced to admit. "But I'm sure it was him. I know it was a Chinese, thin, and about his height."

He smiled at her, but there was no hint of tolerance or sympathy in his burning eyes. "It could have been any Chinese. Because you'd recently seen Cheng you thought of him first. Isn't that so?"

"I don't know," she said reluctantly.

"I know Cheng well," the millionaire said.

"And I'm positive it wasn't him. He'd be very upset to think that you felt him capable of such behavior."

"I didn't intend to make anything of it," she said. "But I wanted to let you know."

"Best that you should," he agreed. "And now I say we should both forget about it." He moved towards the door of the shop and stared out into the dark, wet night. "The thunder and lightning seem to be over. Probably the rain will drag on."

"Very likely."

"I'll have to be going," he said, turning to her again. "You can send me the bill for the paintings and ship them to my Long Island address as you did last time."

"I will," she promised.

"You and that nice young man must soon come visit me."

"Thank you," she said. "Another friend of yours was in here today and bought a painting. A study of Diana, the Moon-Goddess."

"Indeed, may I ask who?" Mr. Asmodeus looked suddenly grim.

"A girl. An extremely pretty girl. She said she was a model. Her name is Helen Beacon."

"So Helen came in here," he said coldly. "And bought herself a painting."

"Yes. She was very friendly."

"She can be charming," he agreed impersonally. "What else did she tell you about herself and me?"

"Not much. She was rather humorous. She said

she couldn't allow you to buy all the good paintings."

"That sounds like her."

"Does she work for you by any chance?"

The millionaire considered a moment. "As a matter of fact you could say she does."

"You must have a large and devoted organization," she marveled.

He had put on his raincape and now carefully fastened it around his shoulders. Then he gave her one of his mocking glances. "I think we can safely claim that," he said with a hint of irony in his tone. "It may be that I have one of the largest and most thorough organizations in the world. Now I must be leaving. But you shall hear from me again. Don't worry!" And he unlocked the door and stepped out into the rainy night. In a moment he had vanished in the wet and darkness.

CHAPTER FOUR

She remained in the gallery only a few minutes after he left. There was a strangeness to the white-haired man that was beyond her comprehension. But in spite of that he was bringing her financial security and giving her artists a chance to sell their wares. Especially Jean Martin. She found it hard to sympathize with Jean's reluctance to sell the millionaire more of her work. And she made up her mind to tell the blonde girl so the next morning. In fact she would go as far as refusing to act as her agent any longer if she wasn't going to take her advice.

It was as simple as that, Marie decided. She locked the gallery door, raised her umbrella and went out into the storm. It was not nearly as bad

as it had been before. She plodded cheerlessly along the black, shining wet street in the direction of her apartment. She regretted the quarrel she'd had with Hugh and wished he was there to talk to. Even to argue with.

The millionaire's request that she should feature a larger display of Cheng's work in the window of the gallery had upset her. Not that she didn't respect the Chinese as an artist but she was shocked by his subject matter. The millionaire's interest in Cheng's work amazed her. But she supposed she would have to go along with his whim. At least for a short time. She could only hope the Chinese artist's work would not all be as repulsive as his first offering. And she was beginning to doubt that the Chinese who'd followed her had been Cheng. More likely it had been a stranger whom she'd confused with the artist.

The rain continued on through the night. And it was another night for her to dream. Once again she had that recurrent nightmare of being in a dark tunnel attacked by huge scorpions. She writhed in her sleep, gritting her teeth and murmuring frantic little cries as she made futile attempts to escape in her nightmare. She awoke to hear the rain pouring down and find herself perspiring and tormented with fear.

It was too ridiculous that she should be haunted by this bizarre dream. A dream in which Mr. Asmodeus had played some lurking role which she could no longer remember. She had never wak-

ened from sleep with a feeling of fear before. It was a new experience for her and a distinctly unpleasant one. For a long while she lay there trying to find sleep once more.

The morning was gray. It had not cleared up as it usually did after a thunder storm. There was still a drizzle as she made her way to work. At the gallery she at once began to pack the lot of six Jean Martin paintings for shipment to Long Island. And when she felt reasonably sure Jean would be out of bed she phoned her.

This time she caught her the first call. Jean's voice sounded rather weak from the other end of the line. "I was expecting to hear from you," the blonde said. Her tone was oddly resigned.

Marie tried to summon some enthusiasm. "I just had to call you and say I sold the other paintings you sent me. You'll be getting a check for them soon."

"I'm not surprised," Jean said in a drab voice.

"You should be pleased," Marie reproved her.

"I suppose so." There was a pause on the line. "I'm not sure it's what I want."

"You need the money," Marie reminded her sharply. "And I need the commission to keep the gallery going. Mr. Asmodeus wants to buy some more of your work. Will you send me another selection as soon as you can."

"I won't promise," Jean said in an unhappy tone.

"Why not?"

"I've been having that same dream nearly every night," the artist complained. "The one in which my paintings are destroyed and I'm mocked by a drowned man!"

"It's a stupid dream," Marie said impatiently. "How can you be so silly!"

"I'm sorry," the other girl faltered. "I was only trying to explain my feelings."

Because Marie had been upset by her own repeated nightmares she knew she should be more sympathetic to the other girl. But she was afraid if she gave the sensitive Jean any kind of encouragement the blonde girl would flatly refuse to sell any more paintings to Asmodeus. So she determined to handle her in a cold manner.

"I'll expect you to send more paintings," she said in a firm voice. "I've worked too hard to have you let me down at this point."

"I'm sorry, Marie," the other girl said brokenly.

"I don't need apologies," Marie told her. "Just send the paintings. I'll see you get a good price for them."

"The money isn't that important to me," Jean protested.

"It is to me," Marie said in a cutting voice and hung up on the blonde girl.

She sat by the phone for minutes afterward feeling badly. She had an overpowering urge to pick up the phone and dial her friend's number and tell

her it was all right. That she needn't sell her the paintings if she didn't want to. But that would be admitting weakness on her part. And Mr. Asmodeus was counting on her to get him more of Jean's paintings. He had paid well for those he'd purchased. Some extra sales and she could enlarge the gallery and buy additional newspaper advertising. She might become one of the important New York art dealers!

And what of her own work? Strangely it didn't seem to matter to her at the moment. She had lost the urge to paint. The desire for money had taken its place. Her ambition was suddenly boundless and she was ready to sacrifice any of those close to her to achieve her ends. Even Hugh James if he insisted on being against her grandiose plans.

In spite of the rain she had a customer. This one a tight-lipped man with hard eyes. Well-dressed in somber clothes he moved about the gallery inspecting the various paintings and paying no attention to her.

At last he halted before a blue-toned Manhattan skyline. "I'll take that one," he said, pointing to it.

She moved over beside him. "It's a pleasant painting. I'm glad you like it."

The thin man's hard eyes fixed on her. "I didn't say I liked it; I told you I'd buy it."

Marie was startled. "But surely you're not taking something you don't admire?"

"How much is it?" he asked in a bitter voice.

"Two hundred dollars," she said. "But perhaps you can find something else you'd prefer."

"I care nothing about art," the thin man said icily. "Please wrap it up."

There was something so final in his manner that she dared not argue with him further. Completely unhappy she took down the painting and wrapped it for him as he'd requested. He literally tossed the money down on the counter in payment and walked out with the painting under his arm without a thank you or any word of parting.

She gathered up the money and put it in her cash register. She was still dazed by his weird talk and behavior. Why should anyone come to the gallery and buy something they didn't want? He was the strangest of all the strange customers she'd been having lately. None of the people who had purchased paintings since Cheng's monster had been in the window had seemed entirely normal human beings. Surely there must be some explanation for these peculiar people suddenly giving her their patronage.

Before she could debate this with herself for any length of time the door of the gallery opened and a drenched and sad-looking Cheng came in. He was carrying two large cardboard-enclosed paintings with him.

"Is wet day," was his opening gambit.

She was staring apprehensively at the paintings he'd brought. "Yes. It is."

"I have more of my work," he said, the eyes be-

hind the thick, horn-rimmed glasses fastened on her.

"I see," she said weakly.

He nodded in grave fashion. "You will do me honor by placing in window with my other one."

"Perhaps," she told him.

"Must," he said firmly. "Is wish of Mr. Asmodeus."

She took a deep breath. It was an intolerable situation. And yet she knew she was not likely to refuse his request. She was too deeply in debt to the millionaire.

"Let me look at the paintings," she told him.

He kept staring at her. "Yes," he said, lengthening the word in his usual hissing fashion.

And then he went about uncovering the first one which was about twenty by twenty-four inches in size. She watched with a kind of horrified fascination not venturing to guess what outrageous thing he might have to show her this time.

As he worked, she said, "It's larger than the last one."

"My masterpiece," he said with a deep conviction that allowed no argument. And he held it up for her to see. Again it was a painting in dark brown tones and a masterwork of the macabre. It depicted an ancient gothic bedroom with a woman's delicate, crocheted nightgown spread out on the bed while in the air above it hovered the weirdest kind of bat she had ever seen. It had great spreading wings, a huge bat's body, the tail of a

pheasant and a true cat's head! It was another monster!

"It's hideous!" she gasped.

"Is the cat-bat," he said, studying the repulsive painting with the true affection of a creator.

"It's so ugly," she protested. "What can it mean?"

"Lady turn into cat-bat," he informed her. "Is old legend."

"I've never heard of it!"

"Is China legend," he said solemnly and putting the painting to one side, he began unwrapping the other one which was of the same size.

"I hope this one is more pleasant," she said.

"Is bird," he said, not looking up from his task.

"I think it's unreasonable of Mr. Asmodeus to expect me to display three of your paintings in my window at one time," she protested. "None of them are pleasant. I'm sure it would be better if we showed only one at a time. And changed them at intervals."

Cheng gave her a scornful look. "You do what Mr. Asmodeus said. He has made promise to me." And with that he showed her the second painting.

"It's as frightening as the other one," she said unhappily. And it was. Again in drab brown it depicted an enormous swan with a serpent's beady eyes, the body of a human-sized tortoise and the long tail of a lizard or perhaps an alligator. It was shown seated on a divan glaring malevolently out from the canvas.

Cheng seemed unaware of her strong reactions to his two new creations. "Will help you place in window," he said in a quiet voice.

And to her surprise she found herself helping transfer two other excellent paintings from her display window to place the new monsters beside the original one. Now her entire window was given over to the repulsive creatures painted by Tom Cheng.

When he'd finished he said, "Will inform Mr. Asmodeus. He will be pleased." And with a stiff little bow he left her.

Marie fully expected a bad reaction to her completely weird window display. But to her surprise there was none. Some people stopped and stared at the paintings in surprise but most of the passers-by didn't even pause to glance at them. It was as if they instinctively realized they were unpleasant and so avoided them.

Certainly the eerie trio of paintings did nothing to hurt business. She had three customers in the afternoon and they all purchased fairly expensive paintings. It was true they were rather peculiar people but she put that down to the window display. It was the type that would only draw odd-balls. But as long as the odd-balls had money did it really matter?

There was a lull in the late afternoon and she decided to phone Hugh. She reached him in his office. When he first answered he sounded sulky but after a little bit became more pleasant. She de-

cided to try and make amends for not seeing him the night before.

"Let me cook you a steak at my place tonight," she suggested. She knew he enjoyed this.

"Sure you're not all dated up with Asmodeus?" he said with sarcasm.

"Very sure," she said. "And that's not funny."

"Wasn't intended to be," he said. "Okay I'll take you up on the steak. What time?"

"I'll be in my apron and have the steak rare and sizzling by seven," she promised him, her tone happy at the thought of a pleasant evening with him. It was good to have their quarrel ended.

"And I'll be there," he promised. "How are things at the gallery?"

"Selling dozens of paintings to the weirdest people."

"Friends of Mr. Asmodeus no doubt," he said acidly. "We'll talk about it tonight."

She put down the phone with a distinct feeling of relief. She didn't want to lose Hugh James if she could help it. But she wasn't going to allow him to interfere with the way she was operating the gallery. He must understand that. And he mustn't try to keep her from working with the millionaire, Asmodeus. She had to do that.

By seven she had the steaks ready as promised and had changed into a smart green mini-dress which her petite blue apron didn't hurt in any way. Hugh arrived only a few minutes after the appointed time. They kissed and made up in the best

movie fashion and sat down to the dinner she'd prepared.

They talked about a lot of things and it wasn't until they had reached the dessert and coffee stage that Hugh James gave her a searching glance. He said, "On my way home from the office I took a look at the gallery window. Some display!"

She gave him a warning glance across the small table. "Be careful!"

"I mean it," he protested with a look of pain on his pleasant face. "I've not seen anything as bad as that in any circus freak show!"

"Those paintings bring in customers."

"Maybe they should bring in a psychiatrist for you," Hugh told her. "Did Asmodeus talk you into putting them in the window?"

"They're the work of a dear friend of his."

"They look like something a crazy man might have done."

"I know the artist and he's quite sane," she said calmly. "Art is something you and I will never agree on so why make an argument about it."

Hugh was exasperated. "You call those grotesques art?"

"Yes. Now let's drop the subject of the window."

"All right," he said, sitting back in his chair. "So what about your mysterious Mr. Asmodeus?"

"There is no need to discuss him either."

"I disagree," the young man said. "I've been

doing some more enquiring into his business activities. I just don't get him at all."

"You might do better to mind your own affairs," she suggested.

A grim smile showed on the blond young man's face. "You're nervous I might turn up something I shouldn't? Something you wouldn't want to hear?"

"Mr. Asmodeus is my good friend," she said unhappily. "Why should you resent him so?"

"Because he's coming between us."

"That's not so!"

"I disagree," Hugh said. "Ever since he came into the picture we've been drifting apart."

"That's your fault," she accused him.

He sighed. "I don't think so. You call this man your good friend. Yet you don't know anything about him."

"Without his help I'd have had to close the gallery."

"That might have been better than having that crazy display in the window of it," Hugh said with disgust. "I know you've gotten sales from Asmodeus. You like his money. But you must admit he's unknown to you."

Marie faced up to him defiantly. "I know his home address and his office address. And I've talked with some of his friends. And you told me he'd been in the munitions business."

"The illegal munitions business," he corrected her.

"Well, I do know something about him. Besides all that I know he collects art."

"I've been checking on that office of his," Hugh told her. "Do you know he's been alone in a large suite of offices for months? That months ago he dismissed all his help. It's a ghost office and he's the only one who ever goes there. And according to the caretaker of the building he's rarely ever there except at night. And then he stays there until the early hours of the morning. What do you make of that?"

"It's not any of my affair," she protested.

He leaned forward urgently. "But does it strike you as the behavior of a normal businessman?"

"I wouldn't know," she said despairingly.

"I'm warning you for your own good," he said. "There's something wrong with that picture."

"Maybe not."

"There has to be," Hugh insisted. "Up until some months ago he was known to be dabbling in those illegal overseas deals. Since then he's apparently done nothing. Yet he keeps the offices."

"He may intend to start his business again."

"I doubt that," Hugh said. "I have another theory."

She stared at him. "What is it?"

"You won't like it."

"Go ahead anyway," she said wearily. "You won't give up worrying the subject."

Hugh's eyes met hers. "I say your Mr. Asmo-

deus is insane. That he had a nervous breakdown months ago."

"He's entirely normal-acting," she protested.

"How do you know? You only met him a short time ago. You have no idea what he may have been like last year. The caretaker of his office building knew him then. And he says he's a changed man."

"He doesn't have to be crazy. He may merely be worried about his business."

"There's more to it than that," Hugh argued. "The caretaker claims your genial Mr. Asmodeus doesn't seem to recognize old business associates and friends. He's been known to walk by them and never speak."

"He could have reasons for that."

"He lives alone out on Long Island and has given up all contact with the business world," Hugh said. "I say there is every indication he's lost his mind."

"You say that because he's helped me," she said bitterly.

"I think that could even be part of his insanity. He fancies himself as a collector of art."

"I think you're talking nonsense," she said hotly.

"Maybe," Hugh said in quiet reply. "But let me ask you one question?"

"What?"

"Is he the one who made you put that freakish collection of paintings in your display window?"

She hesitated. "What if he should be?"

"I'd say that confirms my theory better than anything else. No doubt the paintings were done by some other madman."

Marie got up from the table quickly. "I'm not going to sit here any longer and listen to your wild theories. Do you want to help me clean the dishes up?"

Hugh got to his feet with a faint smile. "I guess I made my story strong enough to really bother you."

She began gathering up the dishes. "I can only say you've always been unfair to me on the matter. And I don't want to argue about it."

"Okay," he said lightly. "I've had my say. No matter what happens don't forget I warned you."

Marie stood with the gathered dirty dishes in her hands and gave him a reproachful look. "You're not being very nice in your attitude towards Mr. Asmodeus. You seem to forget he invited both of us out to see him at his Long Island home."

"I remember, well enough," Hugh agreed. "And I think I may take him up on it. I'm sort of anxious to see his place and how he behaves there."

"If you don't stop carping about him I may not let you come with me," she warned him.

Hugh took some of the dishes from her. "Let's finish our argument in the kitchen. It will give us some diversion as we tackle the dish washing."

And it did. Of course the conversation went in

circles and they ended no more in agreement than they had been in the beginning. Yet she found even having arguments with Hugh was much more stimulating than being alone. It was good that they were together again. With the dishes finished they went back to the living room and played some classical records on her stereo. They were seated on the floor before the stereo listening to the music in the semi-darkened room when the phone rang sharply. So sharply it made Marie start.

She quickly got up from the floor and went over to the phone. "Yes," she said.

"Is this Miss Holt? Miss Marie Holt?" An agitated mature feminine voice asked from the other end of the line.

"I'm Marie Holt," she said. "Is something wrong?"

"Oh, yes! Yes, indeed, there is," the elderly voice quavered.

"What is it?" She felt a strange feeling of apprehension surge through her.

"It's your friend Miss Martin," the woman gasped.

"What about Jean?" she demanded, at once in a panic.

"She's dead!"

"Dead?" Marie echoed in despair.

"Yes. She threw herself from one of the studio windows," the old woman at the other end of the line went on. "I can't imagine why the poor thing

would do it! Always so nice and gentle! And she spoke so well of you!"

Marie tried to gather her thoughts. "How long ago?"

"Maybe half an hour," the woman said. "The police are still here. I thought you should know."

"Yes. Yes. Thank you for telling me!"

"Will you be coming down?"

"Yes," Marie said. "I'll be down at once."

"You might be able to do something," the old woman said unhappily. "It's terrible what with the police and reporters all crowding in. I'm on the floor below her, Mrs. Sanderson. I was there one day when you visited her. You may remember me."

Marie didn't or at least couldn't at that moment. She said, "Yes, I think so."

She put down the phone and turned in the murky room to face Hugh. He was already on his feet and showing a questioning look as he waited for some explanation of the phone call. The room seemed to swirl in front of her and she gave a small, frightened cry feeling sure she was going to faint.

Hugh came and took her in his arms. "What's happened?"

She closed her eyes to shut off the circling room. "Jean Martin! She threw herself from her studio window! She's dead!"

"That's terrible!" he said in a shocked voice. "But you mustn't allow it to shatter you this way."

Marie pressed close to him. "I blame myself. I insisted she turn out more work and sell her paintings to Asmodeus. She didn't want to do it!"

"You were only trying to help her. Make her a success!"

"But I shouldn't have pushed her so!"

Hugh gave a deep sigh. "I don't think you have any business trying to place blame at this moment. Does the girl have any relatives or close friends in the city?"

"No relatives. I was probably her closest friend."

"Is there anything I can do?" he wanted to know. "There will be arrangements to look after."

She brought herself under a kind of numbed control and pulled away from him. "We must go down there at once."

Hugh frowned. "Is that wise?"

"Wise or not it's what I have to do," she said dully.

"I'll go with you," he said.

They hurriedly left her apartment and found a cab. All the way down town she sat huddled dejectedly in a corner of the taxi's back seat. She was trembling and her teeth chattered when she did not clench them. Hugh sat beside her, obviously miserable in his frustration at not being able to help her.

When they drew up before the brick loft building in the dingy Village side street there was a police car with a revolving red light parked out in

front. They left the taxi and skirted around the small group of curious bystanders to enter the building where Jean Martin had lived.

A burly young policeman met them in the hallway. He asked, "You live in the building?"

"No," Marie said. "I was a close friend of Miss Martin's."

"Oh?" The policeman stared at her hard. Then glanced at Hugh. "Who is he?"

"He was also a friend," she said. "I looked after Miss Martin's business affairs. I was her agent."

"You know anything about what happened?"

"Only that she wasn't happy when I last talked with her," she said.

The young policeman regarded them uneasily. "Detective-Sergeant Sharpiro is up in the apartment. You can go on up and tell him I sent you."

"Thank you," she said.

Hugh was at her side and assisted her up the dingy, dark flights of stairs until they reached the top floor where Jean had her studio. The door to the apartment was open and a flat-faced man, hatless and wearing a trench coat, was holding a serious conversation with an officer in uniform. The flat-faced man saw them in the doorway and came across to them with an officious air.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

Marie told him, ending with, "I felt we should come here."

The flat-faced Sharpiro looked bleak. "Looks

like your friend was as loony as most of the art crowd down here."

"She was a very serious painter," she protested. "Her work meant everything to her."

"Yeah?" the flat-faced man sounded skeptical.

"I'll vouch for that," Hugh spoke up.

The detective waved them inside. "Take a look around," he said grimly.

They ventured into the murkily-lighted room and it was only then Marie saw the havoc which had taken place in her friend's studio. Nearly all the valued paintings had been torn from the walls and every one of them had been slashed and destroyed completely. It was a shocking sight.

She stood in the middle of the wreckage and gasped, "I don't understand it!"

"She did a pretty good job before she decided to try dropping from the window," the flat-faced officer said harshly. "If she was so dedicated to her work she sure didn't show it. There isn't a painting here that hasn't been ruined!"

"I think she had a reason for this and her suicide," Marie managed.

"Maybe she was on LSD or speed or some other dope. Most of them keep high a lot of the time," the officer suggested.

Marie shook her head. "I don't think it was drugs," she said. "I've never known Jean to use them. I think she was discouraged at the way her career was turning out."

"And that was her reason for killing herself?" the officer sounded incredulous.

"She was a very sensitive person," Marie tried to explain. "Her work meant everything to her. I think she felt she'd arrived at a dead end."

"There'll be an autopsy," the officer promised. "If she was on drugs we'll know."

"Yes," Marie murmured. "But I'm positive you'll find she wasn't."

Hugh spoke to her in a low voice. "There's nothing we can do here now. I think we should leave."

Marie stared at the image of destruction all around her, at the slashed and mutilated paintings, and turned sorrowfully towards the door. "Yes. Let's go," she said in a low voice.

The flat-faced man asked for her name and address and she gave them to him. She asked about the funeral arrangements and he suggested she get in touch with the authorities later. Then Hugh helped her back down the dark stairway.

All the time she was thinking that she was to blame for what had happened. If Mr. Asmodeus had not come along and she'd not begun selling Jean's paintings to him her friend would not have taken her own life. She'd tried to push Jean too hard at a time when she was near a breaking point and tragedy had resulted. She wondered bleakly how Mr. Asmodeus would feel about what had happened.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mr. Asmodeus reacted to the news of Jean Martin's suicide with what seemed genuine sorrow. He called Marie at the gallery the next morning and expressed his deep sympathy. He also offered to assist in any way he could. Marie thanked him and told him the name of the modest funeral parlor where her friend's body would rest until her burial the following day. The millionaire was careful to get the information correctly from her and promised that she would be hearing from him again.

Marie went through the motions of looking after the gallery despite her upset state. There was little to do. No customers arrived and most of the time she sat at her desk in the rear of the small store. With the initial shock of Jean's death over

she began to see the tragedy in truer perspective. No one could be blamed for what had happened. Jean had been in a highly emotional state for too long a time.

For months the ash-blonde girl had been on the edge of a mental collapse. Last night it had happened. It was wrong to blame Mr. Asmodeus or herself for playing any part in the suicide. As Hugh had pointed out they had only tried to help Jean in a financial way. Marie knew she had to cling to this belief or invite a breakdown for herself.

Hugh came by the gallery at noon. He made the usual biting criticism of the three paintings of monsters in the window when he entered. But she could tell he was doing this merely to distract her from her grief at Jean's death. She told him of the call she'd had from Mr. Asmodeus.

He listened with interest. "Did those two ever meet?"

"No," she said. "I offered to introduce them but Jean made a fuss and said she didn't want to meet him."

"Odd. Since he was ready to become her patron."

Marie sighed. "I thought she was being ungrateful and short-sighted at the time. But I realize now she wasn't responsible. Her mind had already begun to crack."

"Very likely," Hugh agreed.

Marie looked up at him from where she was

seated by her desk. Her brow was slightly furrowed. "The last time I was with her she talked rather wildly."

"Oh?"

"She discussed some weird dreams she'd had."

"What kind of dreams?"

"Rather frightening nightmares. The kind we all get occasionally. But she was reading meanings into them. Making something out of them!"

The young man in the gray business suit smiled thinly. "There is a school of dream interpreters sprung up lately."

"Apparently Jean had been exposed to their theories," Marie said. "She asked me what Mr. Asmodeus looked like. And when I described him she claimed he was one of the sinister characters who tormented her in her dreams."

Hugh looked disbelieving. "That sounds pretty fantastic."

"I told her so. But she was convinced he'd shown up in her nightmares. And she claimed that in all of them he destroyed her paintings. She pictured him as some sort of eerie ghost. The ghost of a drowned man."

"She must have been a little mad when she told you this stuff."

"I agree," Marie said. "I should have tried to get medical help for her then before anything worse could happen. Instead I tried to reason with her."

Hugh said, "And this business of her not want-

ing to sell her work to Mr. Asmodeus was all part of this nightmare thing?"

"Yes."

"She was a sick girl."

"Undoubtedly. So I'm not going to blame myself or Mr. Asmodeus for what happened."

"You shouldn't."

She sighed. "Still, it's all very worrisome. I should have done more for her. I know that now."

Hugh touched a hand to her shoulder. "You have nothing to reproach yourself for. You did very well."

"Mr. Asmodeus asked me about the funeral parlor. He seemed terribly unhappy about what happened," she said.

"He should be," Hugh assured her. "He was planning to make a fortune on her paintings, so he won't be happy with just a few of them. And Jean ruined the others."

"Apparently so he wouldn't get them," she said solemnly.

"I find that strange."

"It was an obsession with her," Marie mused. "She was sure he was buying the paintings to destroy them."

"Now what happens?"

"I have no more of Jean Martin's work. And there can't be many at any of the other galleries. So his are bound to go up in price fabulously."

"And he may make all the money he set out to make, after all."

"It's likely," she agreed.

Hugh gave her a queer, comical glance. "It seems to me Mr. Asmodeus always has a way of winning."

She was afraid to get in another debate about the millionaire. So she said, "Will you be at the funeral parlor tonight?"

"Of course. I'll escort you."

And he did. Marie thought it was fortunate they had decided to be there. They were the only mourners beside the closed casket in the dark little room. Because of the injuries suffered in her fall the undertaker had advised that the body not be shown. Marie felt this was particularly tragic since Jean had been such a beauty.

She and Hugh sat in thoughtful silence by the casket for some time. And then she was conscious of the presence of a third party in the room. She looked up and saw a dark clad Mr. Asmodeus standing by the casket.

She at once rose and went over to him. "How good of you to come," she said.

The swarthy face with the deep lines registered sorrow. "I wanted to be here. I deeply regret the loss of such a talent. I had great plans for the unfortunate young woman."

"I'm sure she would have appreciated that," Marie said.

Mr. Asmodeus was studying her closely. "You look almost ill," he worried. "You mustn't let this

crush you. We shall go on with our work. Your gallery will continue to prosper."

Marie gave him a startled glance. "I haven't been concerned about that. I've been mourning the loss of my friend."

He smiled sadly. "Of course you have. Don't misunderstand what I said. I was merely trying to rouse you from your sorrow." He turned to study the casket and the meagre showing of flowers that had arrived. "I'm happy to see that my floral tribute to the talented young lady reached here safely."

She'd not paid too much attention to the flowers until this minute. And as she reviewed them she saw that Mr. Asmodeus was studying a cross composed of pink and white flowers with an odd black centerpiece. It was the largest of the floral pieces.

She said, "You sent the cross!"

Mr. Asmodeus turned those burning eyes on her. "Don't you agree it is a suitable tribute. After all, her work was of a deeply religious nature."

"Not any orthodox church," Marie was quick to point out. "But she was religious in her own way. I think your cross is most suitable."

He nodded. "I had it made up especially for me."

She stared at it again. "That circle of black leaves in the center is very unusual," she said. "And aren't there some strange letters inside it?"

Mr. Asmodeus gave her a bland look. "That is a

personal touch of my own. A gesture to one whom I considered to have genius."

Marie was studying the cross again. The odd design in its center gave her a strange feeling. It was hard to explain. The tiny black leaves forming it almost seemed to take on life in the softly illuminated room. And for just a moment her imagination let her see them as a myriad of writhing scorpions!

She turned away from the floral display feeling ill. "I had no idea it would end this way," she said huskily.

The white-haired man at her side was quick to sympathize. "I know what a difficult time this must be for you," he said. "But remember how much you did for her. That you brought her work to attention."

"I try to think of it that way," she said. At the same time she felt it was ironic that this man who'd tried to be Jean's patron had indirectly made her take her own life. There was no point in telling him the story. Better that he should never know it.

"You'll be needing a good rest," Mr. Asmodeus went on in his sympathetic tone. "I want you and this young man to visit my Long Island place next weekend. It will be quiet and pleasant there. A change of scene for you."

"I'm not sure," she said, hesitantly.

His burning eyes met hers. "I will not take no for an answer. You must come."

So three days after Jean's funeral they drove out to the mansion on the Long Island shore. Hugh rented a car for the weekend and Marie sat silently at his side as they threaded their way through the traffic of the various busy expressways.

His eyes on the road, Hugh told her, "I've only done this for you. I'm not going to enjoy myself as a house guest of Asmodeus."

She glanced at him. "Why not?"

"There's something about him makes me uneasy. I can't explain it."

"You've built up a conception of him and even if it's not true you're holding to it," she accused him.

"That's not so. There's something about him gives me the creeps. I can hardly bring myself to shake hands with him."

"Now who's neurotic?" she wanted to know.

The face of the young man at the wheel was grim. "I'm not neurotic but I do have a strange feeling where Asmodeus is concerned."

"It's all those stories you've heard about him. Most of them probably lies."

"It was no lie about his office. He's been the only one in it for months."

"There's bound to be an explanation for that."

Hugh gave her a bleak glance. "He's really gotten to you, hasn't he? You can't see anything wrong in him or what he does?"

She was surprised. "What makes you say that?"

"I hoped that after Jean killed herself you'd be

fed up with that crazy millionaire and the changes he's made in your gallery. But instead you follow his advice more blindly than ever."

"Because it has been good so far."

"You even keep those three repulsive monster studies in your gallery window still."

"They've attracted a lot of attention and brought me business," she said, defending her actions.

"The point is you wouldn't ordinarily give those paintings any room in the gallery at all. But because Asmodeus says so, you're featuring them."

"It's no use trying to explain to you," she said unhappily.

"You bet there isn't," he replied in a grim tone. "Because I know your weird friend has hypnotized you or something until you can see no fault in him."

"You're being unfair again," she protested. "We've been invited to enjoy the weekend and have a rest. Let's not ruin it all by quarreling."

The young man at the wheel gave a resigned sigh. "This is the way it usually ends when I try to give you any good advice."

They deserted the expressway for the side road along which Mr. Amosdeus had his home. It took them a while to locate it and they were pleased to note that it had been built along the shore. The building itself was of some kind of brown stone construction with no windows facing the road at all. It was long and only a single story. But it had

many rooms strung out one after another. And its large windows faced the ocean.

There was a kidney-shaped swimming pool alongside of it in a garden area with white and blue tile around it. It was at the pool they were greeted by their host. The millionaire's only concession to the seashore setting was a wide-brimmed Panama hat. He still wore one of his neat black suits.

"I'm glad you found me," he said, shaking hands with them.

Marie told him, "I feel we must be a nuisance."

"Not at all," the white-haired man said affably. "I wouldn't have invited you if I hadn't wanted you." He waved towards the pool. "I trust you both enjoy swimming?"

Hugh smiled. "It looks very inviting. Are we to have it all to ourselves?"

The burning eyes of Mr. Asmodeus fixed on him. "As a matter of fact, yes. I have another guest but he, like myself, rarely swims."

The millionaire took them inside and turned them over to a somber housekeeper of middle age who showed them to rooms at one end of the tremendous rambling house. Marie found her room large, airy and well furnished. And taking the advice of her host to get as much rest and sunshine as she could she at once changed into her bathing suit. It was black and smartly cut. She also took along a black and white diamond-patterned robe

and a small bag of lotions and other necessities as she set out for the pool.

When she got there Hugh was already standing by the pool's edge looking tanned and lithe in green bathing trunks. He was talking to another young man in pale blue slacks and a long-sleeved yellow shirt open at the throat. This second man wore dark glasses and his handsome face seemed familiar to her.

Hugh greeted her with a smile and said, "We're enjoying famous company on this weekend. Surely you recognize Sonny Bartlett?"

She at once identified the famous singer of pop ballads. "I had a feeling I knew you," she said at once, holding out her hand. "I'm one of your fans. I have all your records."

"Thanks!" he said, shaking hands with her. He was thinner than she'd expected though well-tanned. It struck her that at close range he had an almost unhealthy look.

"My name is Marie Holt," she said. "And you've already met Hugh."

"Yes," the famous idol of the young set said, staring at her in a quite frank way. He had the reputation of being a ladies' man and his three divorces and many love affairs had been given wide publicity. "Asmodeus gave you a great build-up. And for once I agree he was right."

Marie blushed. "You're not swimming."

"I have a sinus problem," he said. "Swimming

aggravates it. But I enjoy watching. Especially watching someone as lovely as you."

Hugh gave them both a derisive smile. "If you two will excuse me I'm going to test the water." And he moved away a distance from them, poised himself at the edge of the pool and dived in. He landed with a splash, wheeled around like the experienced swimmer he was and waved back to them, "It's great!" Then he swam on towards the other end of the large pool.

"So you're the artist and gallery proprietor," Sonny Bartlett said, still not taking his eyes off her.

She seated herself on a chaise lounge and spread out her robe and bag. "I haven't done much painting lately," she said.

The singer sat on the chaise lounge beside her. "No wonder. According to what I've heard from our host you're making a mint from your gallery."

"It's been going very well lately," she said.

"Anyone as lovely as you deserves success," the singer said.

His unabashed flattery was embarrassing. She had long admired Sonny Bartlett's talents as a singer but was wary of him as a person. Still, he was pleasant and you couldn't help liking him.

To change the subject, she said, "I'm anxious to see the collection Mr. Asmodeus has assembled. I didn't see too many paintings on the walls as I was shown to my room."

"You won't," the singer said. "Asmodeus is a

strange fellow. He is greedy to own things which he seldom bothers with. The bulk of his collection of paintings is kept in a vault area blasted out of the rocks under the house."

She raised her eyebrows. "You mean he just buys paintings and stores them down there in the dark?"

"That's the idea."

"But that's sacrilege," she protested. "Paintings should be seen and admired. Otherwise, why own them?"

The singer gave her a look of amused irony. "I warned you Asmodeus is greedy. Both of possessions and people. You would be wise to remember that."

Marie frowned. "I've always found him generous and open."

Sonny Bartlett laughed lightly and stared out at the distant silver of the ocean. "He can be a charmer when he's winning you over. It's later you'll find him difficult."

"I haven't so far," she said.

The thin young man with the dark glasses gave her an interested glance. "I wish I could tell you that you're the exception to the rule but I'd be lying to you."

Marie was about to ask him some more about Asmodeus. She felt he knew a good deal of the mysterious millionaire's history. But at that point Hugh swam back to the end of the pool where she was sitting and invited her to join him in the

water. She excused herself from Sonny Bartlett, put on her bathing cap, and slipped into the pool.

The water was warm yet invigorating. She and Hugh spent some time enjoying it before they went back to their chaise lounges to stretch out lazily in the sun. By that time the pop singer had long since vanished somewhere. While they were drying themselves they talked.

Hugh said, "Asmodeus has some illustrious guests."

She smiled at him. "You have to mean Sonny Bartlett and not us."

"I do," he agreed. "You'd never expect to find him here on a weekend. Or enjoying a friendship with a weird character like Asmodeus."

"He seems to know him very well. He was telling me about him when you invited me into the pool."

"Sorry," Hugh said with a wry smile. "It wasn't my intention to spoil any budding romance."

Her face crimsoned. "It had nothing to do with romance. I was trying to find out something about our host."

"I wouldn't count on hearing it from Sonny," her fiancé said. "Likely he is owned by Asmodeus or some of his associates. Most of these singers have financial backers with shady reputations."

She stretched out on the chaise lounge and closed her eyes. "You make it sound so awful. I think you're jealous."

"I have a right to be. That singer was surely making a grandstand play for you."

"Nonsense," she said. But she had the comfortable inner feeling that it was true; and what girl could help being flattered by the fact a famous romantic personality like Sonny Bartlett showed a more than average interest in her.

There was silence between them for a moment as they both basked in the sun. Then Hugh suddenly said, "I think that's it!"

"What's it?" she asked in a sleepy voice.

"Sonny Bartlett being here is part of your shady millionaire's scheme!"

"What scheme?"

"Open your eyes and listen to me," Hugh demanded.

His tone came so sharply that she did look at him and saw that he was turned to her, leaning on an elbow. He had a disturbed expression on his pleasant face.

She said, "What are you imagining now?"

"I'm not imagining anything," Hugh said. "I tell you Asmodeus has this Sonny Bartlett here for a purpose. And the purpose is to have you fall in love with him."

This seemed so ridiculous to her that she also sat up. "You can't mean that!"

"I do."

"It's silly!"

"Not as silly as you may think," her fiancé said

earnestly. "All along I've had the feeling Asmodeus is anxious to gain more control over you. And this is likely how he plans to do it. By having you become interested in that singer."

"Your theory would be funny if it wasn't so wild," she reproved him. "I have no feelings about Bartlett at all. It's fun meeting him and that's that. I imagine that is why Mr. Asmodeus invited him here. He knew I was feeling blue and he felt someone exciting like Bartlett would prove a diversion."

"I still say I'm right," Hugh insisted.

"You'll never admit to being wrong."

"How much will you bet that Sonny doesn't try to make love to you before the weekend is over?"

She looked away. "I don't make ridiculous bets!"

"Are you afraid?"

She gave him an annoyed glance. "Of course not."

"Well, wait and see," Hugh said with tormenting assurance. "You'll find out before we return to the city."

Hugh's prediction made her somewhat uneasy. She couldn't see any reason for Asmodeus deliberately setting up a romance between herself and Sonny Bartlett. Yet Hugh had made the possibility seem convincing. She decided to be careful and be alone in the company of the popular singer as little as possible. This turned out to be easy since Sonny wasn't around for the balance of the day.

He did turn up at dinner time in a white jacket. Mr. Asmodeus had let them know he enjoyed a formal dinner and so they had brought suitable clothes. Hugh looked handsome in a light blue jacket and she wore a yellow gown with a version of the see-through front. She was surprised to see that Sonny Bartlett wore his dark glasses even in the shadowed dining room with its scant illumination from candelabra set out on either end of the linen-covered table.

Mr. Asmodeus presided at the head of the table and proved an entertaining host. He had seemingly visited nearly every country in the world and he dropped celebrities' names with casualness which Marie couldn't help but admire.

She finally told him, "You seem to have been everywhere and known everyone."

Sonny Bartlett smiled thinly and said, "He is on intimate terms with a great many people."

Hugh spoke up, asking the white-haired man, "Are you still conducting your business, Mr. Asmodeus?"

The hawk-face registered a shadow of annoyance. "I am always involved in various projects. What made you ask?"

Hugh was playing his part well. Casually, he said, "I'd heard that you dismissed all your office staff some months ago. But I know you still have your office."

"I've been conducting my affairs from out here," the millionaire said in a cold voice. "I had

no idea you were so interested in my business activity, Mr. James."

Hugh looked uneasy. "I'm not, really," he said in a quiet voice.

Sonny Bartlett gave their host a teasing smile. "Come now, Asmodeus, you're merely pretending modesty. You know many people are curious about your fabulous deals."

"Thank you for reminding me," the white-haired man said with a grim glance the singer's way. "And you suffer in much the same manner from the attentions of your fans, don't you? They offer you scant privacy."

The young man with the gaunt face and dark glasses had taken on an almost frightened expression. He said quietly, "It's a subject we probably had better skip."

"I agree," their host said, his urbane manner suddenly returning. "I don't know what you two young gentlemen have in mind. But I propose to take Marie for a stroll along the shore." And he rose. "You will excuse us."

Hugh and the singer rose with silent politeness as she left the dining room with Asmodeus. She was beginning to sense the swarthy-faced man's power. He had a way of controlling people which she'd not noticed before. It was a little frightening.

As he escorted her out into the cool evening air he glanced up at the partially clouded sky and said, "There's a moon tonight."

Following his glance she saw the pale orb of it. "Yes," she said. "It should make the ocean lovely."

"It will, I promise you," he said, leading her down a flagstone path towards the beach.

She said, "One thing surprises me. You have so few paintings hung in your home. Yet you must own a fabulous collection. And where are all the Jean Martin canvases I sold you?"

The man in the black dinner jacket gave her a cool glance. "I have put them away."

"Didn't you like them after they arrived?"

"I have stored them," he said.

"Sonny Bartlett says you store away most of your collection. I find that odd."

"Why should you?"

"I think paintings should be lived with. I'm sure when Jean Martin did those marvelous religious scenes she wanted them to be hung somewhere to influence people. To make them think and question those Biblical themes."

The white-haired man gave her a cold glance. "I have other plans for them."

"I see," she said, aware that he was displeased with her and yet angry that he should be treating her dead friend's work in this manner. She hardly knew how to react.

Meanwhile Asmodeus had taken her directly to the beach. They were only a few feet from the water's edge now as the waves rolled in on the

shore with a melancholy dirge and mottled foam. The pale moon reflected on the distant surface of the waves to give them gleaming beauty.

The millionaire turned to her. "How do you feel about the ocean?"

She said, "I enjoy it. But sometimes it frightens me."

"I find that interesting," the man in the black dinner jacket said. "I also have rather mixed feelings about the ocean."

Marie looked at him. "Are you afraid of it, too?"

His burning eyes were fixed on her. "I have certain unhappy memories associated with it," he said. And the way he said this sent a chill surging through her.

"Memories?" she questioned him.

"Yes. Of a sea much different from the calm one we stand beside now," he said. The hawk face turned towards the ocean and he paused for the sound of the waves as they washed in a slight distance more greedily encroaching on the wet sands. "I think of a storm. The wind howling and mountainous waves!"

She was awed by his strange manner. "And you were part of it?"

He nodded and looked at her with those weird eyes again. "Yes. I was part of it."

She stood there on the deserted beach with a great panic rising up in her. Staring at him she recalled Jean's account of her weird nightmare in

which her whole collection of paintings had been engulfed by the angry ocean! Another wave pounded in on the beach close to her. And she also remembered her dead friend had spoken of an eerie stranger in her dream whom she chose to identify with Asmodeus. A mocking phantom with seaweed draped from his shoulders. And as she stared at the millionaire with terrified eyes she saw the seaweed as Jean had described it!

CHAPTER SIX

"Is something wrong?" the white-haired man asked.

Marie was still staring at him in a transfixed manner. But his words broke the spell. With a tiny shudder she came back to herself and saw that the seaweed on his shoulders had been an illusion, caused by the shadows and the moonlight. She felt deeply embarrassed at her behavior.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I lost myself in a reverie."

"Interesting," he said, those strange eyes studying her. "May I enquire what sort of reverie?"

"Nothing important," she said. "Being close to the sea always seems to have a strange effect on me. I think we should walk back to the house."

"Whatever you say," the urbane Mr. Asmodeus replied agreeably. As they retraced their steps in the direction of the mansion, he asked, "How do you like our singer friend?"

"Sonny Bartlett?"

"Yes."

"He seems very nice," she said. "How do you happen to know him?"

The man at her side smiled. "You think him an unlikely companion for me?"

"You are very different types," she pointed out. "And hardly in the same age group."

"That is true," the white-haired man said. "The fact is I have done a good deal to promote his career."

A feeling of caution came to her as she heard this. Hadn't Hugh suggested this was the link between the two utterly different sorts of men? She said, "I see."

"I've been able to help him just as I hope to help you with your gallery project," the millionaire went on. "It is one of the pleasures available to a man of my means."

Marie gave him a side glance. "You enjoy being a patron of the arts."

"Yes," he replied quietly. "I'm sure you can say that."

Privately she was wondering if his interest didn't extend much further. Not only did he enjoy underwriting artistic talent he also probably derived pleasure from the power this gave him. She

had an idea his protégées might turn out to be like so many puppets on strings and that the exercise of power was his chief reason for being generous.

She asked, "Do you see a lot of Sonny?"

"He spends many weekends here," the white-haired man said. "But often he finds it dull. Your being here has changed that. I don't think I'm breaking a confidence if I tell you that he considers you lovely and charming."

Marie smiled. "That's very nice of him."

"Sonny is really interested in you," the millionaire told her. "If you weren't engaged to young James I'm sure he'd express a desire to see more of you."

"But I am engaged," she said evenly. Again she was thinking of Hugh's prediction that the millionaire was playing a game of trying to throw her and the popular singer together. Mr. Asmodeus was engaged in some matchmaking.

He gave her a sharp glance as they reached the front entrance of the house. "How serious is it between you two?"

"We hope to be married soon."

The millionaire lingered on the steps looking bleak. "I think it would be a mistake on your part. You could do much better."

"I happen to be in love with Hugh."

"Love is an emotion hugely overrated," the white-haired man said coldly. "I believe intelligent people tend to keep it under control."

Marie smiled thinly. "Perhaps I'm not too intelligent, then."

"On the contrary," he said. "I consider you to have more than average intelligence. And I would not regard Sonny's interest in you lightly."

"He hasn't had a stable romantic life up to this point," she said with meaning.

"Another reason he may be ready to settle down to a normal family life at this point," Mr. Asmodeus said in his persuasive way.

"Is that possible in his kind of life?"

"I think so," the millionaire said. "Let us go into my library for a little. I have some business to discuss with you."

When they entered the reception hall she could hear the voices of Hugh and the singer in casual conversation from the living room. Mr. Asmodeus made no attempt to take her in there but led her down a dark hallway to a richly paneled library. There amid the book-lined walls he waved her to a chair by his broad mahogany desk.

"This is where I work when I'm at home," he said with a smile on his swarthy face as he stood behind his desk.

"It's a magnificent room," she exclaimed, glancing around it. Again she was surprised to discover there were no paintings hung in the room. But over the fireplace there was a large, excellent reproduction of a weird painting of a bat-like being flying through a star-studded clouded universe towards an area of the earth's round surface.

The white-haired man noticed her interest in the reproduction. "Does it catch your fancy? It's one of Paul Gustave Doré's studies. I believe he called it Lucifer, or Satan as the Light-bearer."

She studied it with an odd fascination. "It's excellent," she said. Then turning to him, she asked, "But why do you have a reproduction here when you own so many fine originals you could put up in its place?"

His smile was mocking. "I happen to have a personal liking for Doré. His talent for the eerie and fantastic appeals to me."

"Art is a very personal thing," she agreed.

"Please give attention to what I'm about to tell you," Mr. Asmodeus said earnestly. "For I have some advice that I believe will bring you in a great deal of money."

Marie was at once interested for she had come to have a great respect for the talent of Mr. Asmodeus in financial matters. She asked, "Is this something to do with the gallery?"

"Yes," he said, clasping his hands behind his back and coming around to the front of the desk to stand before her. "Have you ever heard of an artist named Von Klare?"

She thought for a moment, then confessed, "I'm afraid I haven't."

"That doesn't surprise me," the swarthy-faced man said. "Even among artists and art dealers he is practically unknown in America. He was a Dutch landscape artist of about a century ago."

"There were a number of them," she said. "The majority did not earn important reputations."

The millionaire nodded. "You put it very well. But they were all fine artists. Not Rembrandts of course, but competent and pleasing in their work. Over the years Von Klare has been neglected. Many of his paintings have found their way over to this country but they have not commanded high prices."

"Do you think this may change?" she asked eagerly.

"I'm certain of it," the man with the hawk-face and dark-circled eyes said soberly. "I have many contacts in the art world. And I've just been informed that Lucius Barr, *The N.Y. Times* art critic, is about to take up the cause of Von Klare. I'm positive his interest in the painter will bring about a rush to buy Von Klares. The prices for his work will zoom and anyone who has them will be in line to make a tremendous profit."

Marie's eyes sparkled. "It sounds exciting."

The white-haired man standing above her in the mellow light of the library showed a satisfied smile. "I knew you would feel that way."

"But where could I find these paintings? And how much capital would it require to make an investment in them?"

"Most of the large dealers have some," he assured her. "And you needn't worry about money. I'll provide you with all that you need for the proj-

ect. Later we can divide our profits on an equal basis. Does that appeal to you?"

"It's a wonderful opportunity," she exclaimed. "It could really make the gallery."

He nodded. "That's another thing. I think you should keep your eyes open for larger quarters. Your business is bound to improve and you'll need the space. You can sub-let your present spot when you find a new location."

Marie gave him a grateful smile. "It's all been so easy since I met you. Why have you been so kind to me?"

Those weird burning eyes met hers. "Because I believe you are one of those whom I can depend on. You'd be startled to learn how few there are in that category."

"You can count on me," she said. "I promise you that."

"Thank you," he said, looking pleased. "Now you mustn't mention this Von Klare business to anyone else. The first of the week I'll deposit twenty-five thousand dollars to your gallery account. And you can begin making purchases at once."

"I can't wait to begin," she said enthusiastically.

Mr. Asmodeus gave her a benign look. "Let's not think anymore about it. I want you to have a relaxed weekend. You need the rest."

Her face shadowed as thoughts of Jean Martin came to her mind. She told him, "This would all

be so wonderful if only Jean hadn't taken her life. I still feel responsibility for that."

"Nonsense," he said, his manner becoming stern. "She was a weak person. Sooner or later she would have gone that way. You shouldn't even think of it. And when you become busy with this new project you won't have time for such foolish regrets."

She sighed. "No. That will be good for me."

"And now we should join the others," the millionaire said. "Or that young man of yours will be getting jealous."

She rose with a small laugh. "I wouldn't worry about that," she said.

The millionaire escorted her from the library down the long, shadowed hallway to the softly-lighted living room. Hugh and the popular young singer were seated in chairs before a massive gray stone fireplace. Not until they came close to the two did she realize that Hugh was in a kind of drunken stupor.

He glanced up at her from his chair, a half-empty glass in hand and managed a vacant smile. Then, as if the effort had been too much for him, he collapsed against the back of the chair and closed his eyes.

Mr. Asmodeus raised his white eyebrows and turned to Sonny Bartlett. "What's been going on here?"

The slim singer with the dark glasses rose and

in a low voice told them, "He's been overdoing the drink bit but I didn't realize how bad he was until a few minutes ago."

Marie stared at her fiancé in consternation. "I've never known him to get in this state before!"

Mr. Asmodeus smiled at her. "You mustn't be too annoyed with him. Often drinks catch up on you before you know it. Especially when you're tired."

"But this is embarrassing!" she protested.

"Think nothing of it," her host said with understanding. "I'll see he gets safely to his room to sleep it off. You stay here and have a chat with Sonny."

She was going to excuse herself but it didn't seem gracious under the circumstances. She watched as the white-haired man roused a confused and drunken Hugh to his feet, looped his arm around his neck, and thus supporting him took him out of the room. She watched until the two vanished in the shadows of the hallway and then she turned to Sonny Bartlett with a tiny gesture of despair.

"I can't understand it," she said. "Hugh never drinks too much."

The gaunt handsome singer in the dark glasses shrugged. "It could happen to anyone."

"I feel ill about it," she worried. "What will Mr. Asmodeus think?"

The young man with the dark glasses laughed softly. "You'll find that Asmodeus needs a lot to

shock him. He'll manage your fiancé with ease. You mustn't think about it." He motioned her to the chair in which he'd been seated. "Sit down over here."

She did and he provided her with a tiny glass of a sweet-tasting liqueur with which she was not familiar. She sipped it and found it pleasant. "It's nice," she said. "What is it?"

Sonny smiled. "It's Greek. Don't ask me the name. Asmodeus imports it from his homeland."

"I keep forgetting he's a Greek."

"Probably because he is a true cosmopolitan," the singer said, sitting on the arm of her chair. "He belongs anywhere in the world he happens to be."

"And he's so astute!"

"Agreed," the young man with the dark glasses said. "I hear he has your future well in hand."

"I'm certain of it," she said, happily, sipping her drink.

"Asmodeus takes care of his own."

"I understand he's played an important part in your career," she said.

Sonny nodded. "Yes. Without him I wouldn't have gotten anywhere."

"I say he's a wonderful person," she enthused.

"No one would question that," the singer agreed. "But there is one thing you should clearly understand. He has a price."

She looked up at him. "You mean he expects a share of the success he creates?"

"He's very jealous that he shall have it."

"There's nothing wrong in that," she said. "I expect to pay him for what he's doing for me."

The singer smiled. "In that case you'll have no problems."

She frowned slightly, staring into the fireplace at the yellow and crimson flames eating into the gray logs. "No financial problems," she said. "But other things in my life are going wrong. First, my friend Jean takes her life, leaving me with a feeling of guilt. And now I'm having troubles with Hugh. He's suddenly become suspicious and jealous. And this drinking thing tonight is beyond understanding!"

The young man with the dark glasses studied her. "How long have you two been engaged?"

"More than a year."

"Are you sure the engagement hasn't become a bad habit?"

She let her mouth drop open slightly. "What do you mean?"

"Perhaps it was a mistake from the beginning. And now neither of you know how to get out of it."

"No."

"Sure?"

"We were very happy until a little while ago," she insisted. But she was already wondering. Thinking back and trying to determine whether the young man was right. Whether what he said was true or not. Had her engagement to Hugh

been decided on too hastily? And had they gradually been drifting apart?

The singer leaned close to her. "You're a very different sort of person from Hugh," he told her. "I can't see you as a team. I say you are more like me. I felt it from the moment we met by the pool!"

"Please, Sonny!"

"I have a right to tell you what I feel for you," the young man in the dark glasses said firmly. "I'm in love with you, Marie. I think you should leave Hugh and marry me."

"You're joking!" she protested weakly, yet she knew that he wasn't. Hadn't Mr. Asmodeus prepared her for this by telling her how the singer had reacted to her.

Sonny Bartlett leaned closer to her and gently took her in his arms and drew her up to him. "I have never known a perfect love before," he said earnestly, "and I feel you could be it." His lips pressed hard against hers in a kiss expressive of his strong emotion. And languorous from the heat and drink she surprised herself by surrendering completely to his embrace.

After a little she drew back from him and said, "I'm sorry that happened."

"I made it happen," Sonny said with warm pleasure.

"Let's not try to rush things," she protested in a confusion of feelings.

"All I ask is that you give me some of your time

and your affection," the singer said. "I'll prove to you that your engagement to Hugh is a mistake."

"We'll see," she said. "I'm fond of Hugh."

"I doubt if you love him," Sonny said coolly.

"I was sure I did," she declared looking up into the gaunt face with the dark glasses. "Why should I suddenly feel as I do now?"

"Because you've met me," was his reply. And he took her in his arms for another kiss.

Marie left him as soon as she could. But not before he'd extracted a promise from her that she would see him occasionally when they returned to New York. She had hesitated at making the promise feeling it was not fair to Hugh, but the singer had persuaded her by suggesting she must also be fair to herself. It made sense.

In her room she sat on the side of her bed for long minutes trying to straighten it all out in her head. Whether she liked it or not she was drifting away from Hugh. More and more the urbane Mr. Asmodeus was playing a major role in her life. So it was only natural that she should be drawn towards his famous protégé Sonny Bartlett. The young singer had great charm and she found him hard to resist. Yet, like all the people she'd met who were associated with the millionaire, he had a strange tense quality about him.

The drink Sonny had given her had been very potent. Her head was reeling. And she could understand how Hugh had suddenly fallen into a drunken stupor if he'd indulged in the strong

liqueur without realizing its danger. In an almost dream-like state she prepared for bed. And when she finally slipped between the satin sheets she fell into a deep sleep almost at once.

And then the torturing dreams began! Her pretty face contorted in fear and she clenched her hands on the coverlet as the terrifying fantasies of her upset mind took control of her. She was in a huge mansion, much like the house of Mr. Asmodeus, and making her way down stone steps to a dark dungeon-like room. She carried only a small candle for light and as she moved slowly along the low, narrow brick corridor cobwebs brushed against her face.

She lifted a hand protectively to push them away and went cautiously on to the end of the corridor. Here she discovered a wooden door and from behind it she heard a piteous weeping. It was such an eerie, frightening sound it chilled her blood. At the same time she was anxious to discover who it was in there. She groped for the door handle and turned it. The door gave way beneath the pressure of her hand and she saw revealed a prison-like stone cubicle with straw on its floor.

Holding the flickering candle higher she was able to see further into the dank cubicle and there in a far corner of it was the crumpled figure of a woman in tattered, ragged clothes. The creature in the corner stirred and gazed up at her. And she saw it was Jean Martin!

Jean's face was haggard and drawn and she

jumped up and pointed an accusing finger at her. "You caused me to die!" the apparition in the cell corner screamed at her.

"No!" she cried, drawing back from the phantom.

Now Jean came closer. "You killed me and you killed my work!" she cried.

"Please!" she begged the phantom to show pity.

Then from behind her there came a loud, macabre burst of laughter and she wheeled around quickly to see the thin, sinister figure of the weird artist, Cheng. The Chinese eccentric was close behind her and held something concealed in his hands.

"You!" she gasped.

"Is gift!" he chortled at her maniacally and opened his hands to reveal a horrifying giant scorpion in them.

She gave another loud scream as he tossed the repulsive monstrous creature towards her. It's scaly, hairy body and prickly legs flew up against her face sending her into a paroxysm of sheer terror!

Feebly beating the empty darkness she awakened with a start. For a moment or two it seemed she was still in the throes of her nightmare. And then she calmed down a little. What a dreadful dream it had been! She could only blame it on her tortured conscience and the potent drink. The terror it had induced continued on into the waking state and she couldn't return to sleep.

With a sigh she got out of bed and went over to the window. Drawing back the drape she was able to get a good view of the swimming pool area, and what she saw out there made her all at once become rigid with attention. Standing by the diving board was the dinner-jacketed figure of Mr. Asmodeus and facing him was the lithe form of a girl in a crimson bathing suit. Her host seemed to be lecturing the girl about something.

As Marie studied the two she gradually realized the girl was the one who had come by the gallery and purchased a painting. The one who had spoken of her career as a model and given her name as Helen Beacon. When Marie mentioned the incident to Asmodeus he'd not seemed pleased. Now he and the lovely girl were engaged in some kind of argument.

All at once Asmodeus raised a hand and slapped the girl hard across the face. He did this twice and then the girl pressed her own hands to her face and turned and ran off in the direction of the house. Asmodeus was left there alone with an angry look on his hawk face. After a moment he followed the girl and vanished from Marie's view.

What did it mean? Marie stared out into the semi-darkness which was eerily lighted by the lamps installed in the bottom of the pool. What was the dark-haired model doing there? And how had Asmodeus managed to conceal her from them during the day and evening? Had she been hiding in some remote part of the house? Keeping away

from them on the orders of their host? All these questions plagued Marie's mind.

She'd also been shocked by this display of wanton cruelty, at least it had seemed that, on the millionaire's part. What had the dark beauty done to enrage him so? And why had she chosen the lonely after-midnight hour to take a dip in the pool? The area was deserted now. After a moment Marie let the drape fall back across the window and returned to her bed.

Sleep still eluded her. It seemed that she was getting deeper and deeper into a situation of which she really knew nothing. Certainly the mysterious millionaire had befriended her but she still knew little about him. Could he possibly be evil as her dead friend and client, Jean Martin, had suggested? The thought seemed absurd in view of the kindness he'd shown her. And yet she had seen him in a very different mood just now.

Eventually weariness brought her a troubled sleep. When she woke the next morning it was dark and the entire area was shrouded with a thick fog. She met Hugh at breakfast and he looked pale and haggard. Since the others had breakfasted earlier they were the only two at the table and were able to talk freely.

Hugh was all apologies. "I don't know what happened to me last night," he said. "I was drinking with Sonny and the next thing I woke up in my bed this morning with a terrible hangover."

She gave him a knowing glance. "You made a spectacle of yourself."

"That's new for me."

"It happened."

"I'll have to apologize to Asmodeus," Hugh said, sipping his coffee. "It must have been that Greek drink."

"I'd rather not talk about it," she said coldly.

He stared at her. "You sound pretty upset about nothing much!"

"I am."

Hugh's pleasant face crimsoned. "I'd expect you to stand by me in a situation like this."

"You're capable of your own apologies," she told him.

He was frowning. "The weather's rotten. Let's pack and get away from here as soon as we have breakfast."

"That doesn't seem very gracious to me in view of the kindness Mr. Asmodeus has shown us," she said.

Hugh pushed his chair away from the table and stood up. "I didn't want to come in the first place, if you'll remember. It was Asmodeus who forced us to pay him this visit." He tossed his crumpled napkin on the table.

"We'll not argue about that," she said.

"Why?" he asked with sarcasm. "We seem to argue about everything else these days!"

Marie's expression was cold. "Perhaps we'd bet-

ter consider that," she said. "It might be wise to think over our entire relationship. We could be both making a mistake."

The blond young man stared at her in astonishment. "That's a fine thing to tell me at a time like this!"

"We'll have to face it sooner or later," she said. "Why not, here, this morning?"

"At least let us get back to the city before we talk about it," he said more unhappy than angry. "I still say let's leave right away!"

"I think you should go," Marie told him. "You're obviously anxious to. I can get a drive back to the city with Sonny or Mr. Asmodeus."

Hugh stared at her for a long moment in silence. Then he said, "So that's it. Sonny is the new attraction!"

Before she could make any kind of reply he turned and strode out of the dining room. She sat alone at the table feeling lost and forlorn. She'd not intended the argument between them to take on the proportions it had. In fact she'd meant to tell him about what she'd seen at the poolside during the small hours of the night and ask his opinion about it.

Now it was too late. Hugh was off in a rage. She finished her coffee and got up from the table. She went out to the living room and found Sonny seated there with the morning paper. The popular singer looked up from the paper and smiled on seeing her.

"How are you this morning?" he asked.

"A little mixed-up," she said ruefully.

The young man with the dark glasses got to his feet. "Most of us are," he said.

She gave him a worried look. "I had a nasty argument with Hugh at the breakfast table. I think he's going back to New York on his own right away."

"Great!" Sonny Bartlett enthused. "That will give me a chance to drive you home."

"Would you mind?"

"I'm already looking forward to it," he said.

She sighed and went over to the window and saw that Hugh's rented car was still parked with the others. Then her gaze shifted to the swimming pool and the scene of last night came vividly to mind again. She turned to Sonny and decided to query him about it.

She said, "I had a dreadful nightmare last night."

"Tell me about it," he said with a smile.

"It doesn't make any kind of sense," she said. "But I couldn't go to sleep again. I walked around my room and went to the window and looked out. And I saw Mr. Asmodeus standing by the pool. It was very late."

"He roams about a lot at night."

She looked directly at the gaunt young man with the dark glasses. "The odd thing was that there was a girl with him. A girl in a bathing suit.

Someone I met once. Her name is Helen Beacon. Do you know her?"

"Helen Beacon?" the singer repeated. "No. The name doesn't mean a thing to me."

But Marie could tell by the expression on his face and the tone of his voice that this wasn't true. Sonny Bartlett had the air of a man deliberately telling a lie.

CHAPTER SEVEN

She determined to keep on questioning him. It was possible she could trap him into some admission that would help explain the mystery. So she said, "I'm surprised you don't know her. She's a friend of Mr. Asmodeus."

The singer shrugged. "Not every friend of his is a friend of mine."

"I suppose not," she said doubtfully, knowing it was barely possible the young man with the dark glasses was telling the truth.

"What about Asmodeus and this girl?" he wanted to know.

"They were standing talking," she said. "I think they were quarreling about something."

"Odd."

"I thought so."

"And?"

"After a few minutes Mr. Asmodeus slapped her hard on the face twice. She ran away in tears and he followed her."

Sonny Bartlett raised his eyebrows. "That's a strange story."

"I was shocked," she said. "Why would this Helen Beacon hide herself if she is also a guest here?"

"I can't say," the singer replied uneasily. "Maybe it was all part of your dream."

"No. I'm sure it wasn't," she protested.

"Then it does require an explanation," the young man agreed.

"And I can give it." This statement rang out clearly behind her in a familiar voice and she turned to see that their host had come into the room. Mr. Asmodeus was regarding her with a look of grim amusement.

She gasped. "I didn't know you were here."

"I entered quietly. And since listeners rarely hear any good of themselves I heard your comments about me."

There was a hint of pent-up fury about him that frightened her. "I didn't intend to talk behind your back," she said quickly.

"And yet you did," her host said in a cold, mocking way.

"Not really," she protested. "But the incident did upset me. I felt I had to talk it over with someone."

The white-eyebrows lifted. "But why choose Sonny rather than question me personally?"

She looked down. "I don't know."

"I'm afraid someone has been talking about me to you," the hawk-faced man said sadly. "Someone who has resented my interest in you."

Sonny Bartlett spoke up at this point. "If you intend to explain what went on between you and that girl why not do it?"

"Gladly," their host said. And he asked her, "Are you listening?"

"Yes," she said in a small voice.

"The young lady you saw was not Helen Beacon," he said carefully.

"It looked exactly like her," she protested.

"I promise you it wasn't her," the white-haired man said firmly. "It was one of the maids here who does happen to resemble Miss Beacon to a remarkable degree. She has a habit of taking after-midnight dips in the pool and I have reprimanded her before for this. Last night she disobeyed me again. I gave her a lecture and when she replied in a saucy manner I lost my head to the extent of slapping her. I'd bring her here to corroborate my story but she left early this morning."

Marie listened with growing embarrassment. It all fitted. And she began to see she'd made a dreadful mistake. She'd jumped to needless conclusions, no doubt because Hugh had filled her mind with uncertainties about the millionaire.

Sincerely, she said, "I'm sorry I misjudged you."

"It's quite all right," he said calmly. As he finished speaking there was the sound of a car starting in the parking lot and he told her, "I expect that is your friend, Hugh, leaving. He told me that he would be."

She said, "I'm sorry. Things don't seem to be working out well."

"Nonsense," Asmodeus said, coming over to her and being affable again. "I can understand your curiosity about what happened last night. I've explained. And no harm done."

She looked at him earnestly. "I didn't really think you were seriously in the wrong."

"Of course she didn't," Sonny Bartlett chimed in laughingly. "We're all good friends here."

"The best of friends," Mr. Asmodeus said with satisfaction. And to her he confided, "You know I had mixed feelings about that young man of yours. I think it is best that he's left."

"I didn't want to quarrel with him," she faltered.

Mr. Asmodeus smiled and there was a twinkle in those strange burning eyes. "True lovers' quarrels have a way of getting patched," he predicted hopefully.

The rest of the day passed without event and in the late afternoon Sonny Bartlett drove her back to the city. He insisted they have dinner at a restaurant on the way in and before they parted he had arranged an evening date with her for later in

the week. It looked very much as if a new romance might be entering her life.

In view of the short time the singer's previous romances had lasted she wasn't putting too much stock in his protestations of love for her and when she was safely back in her apartment she was almost at the point of trying to get Hugh on the phone at his place. But she forced herself not to make the call. She comforted herself with the thought that he would surely get in touch with her the following day.

But she was wrong. Monday came and went without any call, though she did hear from both Sonny and Mr. Asmodeus. Sonny merely called to tell her how deeply in love with her he was. She laughingly put him off with a promise to talk about it more when they met for their date later in the week. Mr. Asmodeus made a business call. He informed her he was depositing the money he'd promised to the gallery account and urged her to lose no time acquiring all the Von Klare canvases she could.

Marie at once embarked on this project with all her energies and between it and taking care of the gallery she had no time to think of anything else. She continued to show the three monster paintings of the weird Cheng in the gallery display window and customers kept on arriving for a lively total of sales. Some of the weird types who had purchased paintings earlier returned again for second and third purchases.

In the beginning she had a difficult time rounding up any Von Klare paintings but gradually she began to dig them out. By the middle of the week she had gathered more than a dozen of the Dutch artist's pastoral scenes. She gave them some study since she was curious to discover what would eventually make them in demand, what quality *The N.Y.Times* critic would discover in them.

It was difficult to decide. They were competently executed with a lot of fine detail. And perhaps they were a trifle more somber in tone than some of the other Dutch painters' works. It was only when she examined them very closely that she made a strange discovery. In nearly every painting Von Klare had included a tiny animal or bird figure of the grotesque type of those in the paintings by Cheng. These tiny monsters were so carefully worked into the general pattern of the paintings that you did not notice them at first. But they were there. In every canvas!

In the end she dismissed this as a coincidence and thought no more about it. As the week advanced and she heard nothing from Hugh she became concerned. She didn't want a final break to come between them this way and yet she felt he should make the first move towards a reconciliation.

It was Thursday morning and she was to see Sonny Bartlett for dinner that night. There was a temporary lull in customers and she seated herself at her desk to study the catalogues of some art

dealers in Chicago. She was still in search of Von Klares though her rear storage room was stacked with them.

It was another dull day and so the gallery was shadowed. She'd turned on her small desk lamp to study the catalogues and was deeply involved in this when the door of the gallery opened. She turned to see the figure of a tall, spare man with a lantern-jawed face.

She got up and went over to greet him. "Yes?" she said.

He was wearing a topcoat and battered soft hat. He removed his hat and she noticed that his hands had a tremble in them and his head was also not quite steady. He had rheumy blue eyes set in hollow sockets in a wrinkled face and was much older than she'd originally realized.

"My name is Rodding," he said, in a voice whose tremor matched his physical one.

"Are you interested in a painting?" she asked, ready to switch on the extra overhead lights.

The weird old man looked at her strangely. "I'm interested in some special paintings. The ones you have in the window."

"I'm sorry," she said. "They aren't for sale."

The head trembled as he peered at her through the shadows. "Not for sale, eh?" He uttered a cackle of laughter.

"What's so funny about that?" she wanted to know, fearful that the monster paintings had attracted a maniac.

"I'm the artist who painted them," he informed her.

"You're making a mistake," she told him.

"No," he shook his head. "Those paintings are mine. Did them thirty or forty years ago."

It was a strange dilemma. She said firmly, "You're mistaken. Those paintings are the work of a Chinese artist named Cheng. He brought them here himself."

The weird old man smiled at her in derision. "Then you've been had, lady. I did those for a fella long before you were born." He stared at her with those watery blue eyes. "Are you a Satanist?" he asked.

"Am I what?"

"A Satanist," he repeated. "It was for one of them I did those paintings. He paid me well enough. Never expected to see them again. He told me what he wanted and I carried it out. He invoked the demon to make sure my work had the blessing of the Prince of Darkness. Palas aron azinomas! I remember the invocation after all these years!"

By now Marie was thoroughly alarmed. She had backed away from the trembling old man. And she said, "I don't understand anything you're talking about. I wish you'd go!"

The wrinkled face showed a sly smile. "I wouldn't expect you to admit it. You're a pretty one! But then you get all kinds in a coven of

witches. You wouldn't be showing those three paintings if you didn't want your own to know!"

Marie was by her desk now and she reached out for the phone. "If you don't leave at once I'll call the police," she warned the oldster.

He raised a trembling, withered hand. "Don't do that," he said. "I'll go. I just wanted to let you know it was my work. I dedicated them to Lucifuge, the Prime Minister, Satanachia, the Grand General and Agaliarept." And with that he replaced his battered hat and unsteadily made his way out of the gallery and into the street.

As soon as he left she went to the door to see where he had gone. By that time he had disappeared in the crowd. There was no sign of him. His visit and his weird talk had given her a bad scare. All along she'd worried about the display and the fact it might attract crackpots. This time it surely had brought one in. She drew a sigh of relief that he had left without any great fuss. She had no doubt that he was mad and all his talk about being the artist who'd done the paintings was sheer nonsense. As well as his references to Satanism and her being a witch! People as feeble-minded as that should be locked up for their own good, she thought indignantly.

She went to the phone and looked up the number of Mr. Asmodeus at his business address. She had never tried to get in touch with him there before but felt she should. She needed someone to

talk to. When she dialed the number she received a recorded message telling her the number was out of service. With a feeling of dismay she put the phone down. Hugh had been right. The mysterious millionaire had closed his offices.

Again she had a compulsive desire to phone Hugh. But she couldn't do it. She felt guilty about the weekend and hurt that he had not tried to reach her since. At least there was one bright spot in it all. She would be seeing Sonny Bartlett for dinner and she'd be able to talk to him about her odd visitor then.

She'd agreed to meet the young pop singer at a popular French restaurant on Fifty-Second Street. When she got there she at once picked him out sitting at the bar. His mod suit and dark glasses were trademarks that made him stand out in the group.

He greeted her with a kiss and they were led to their table by the head waiter. Sonny appeared unusually nervous and he told the head waiter he was expecting a phone call and that it was important and he didn't want to miss it. Then he gave his attention to her.

"You look wonderful," he said, holding her hand but his words had an empty ring. "What's been happening?"

"A lot," she said with a smile, and she went into an account of the trembly old man coming into the gallery and raving about the paintings being his and hinted she was a Satanist. She ended with, "His talk frightened me!"

Sonny smiled at her. "He could have accused you of worse things."

"I'm sure he was mad!"

"Way, way out," the pop singer agreed. But she had the impression he was barely listening to her and that he was getting increasingly on edge.

She said, "I tried to get in touch with Mr. Asmodeus but his office phone has been disconnected. How do you explain that?"

"He doesn't need the office anymore," Sonny told her.

"I understand he dismissed all his staff months ago."

"He uses his home as headquarters," Sonny said. "You probably could have reached him there."

"I didn't like to try," she said.

The young man with the dark glasses was staring at her. "Heard from your fiancé since Sunday?"

"No. He's probably very angry."

"Let it stay that way," Sonny Bartlett advised. "Good riddance!"

"I'm very fond of Hugh," she said stoutly.

The singer squeezed her hand. "I'm your boy," he said.

The waiter came and he ordered. She tried to keep up a conversation but found it difficult as the singer's attention seemed to keep wandering. She saw that he was merely playing with his food and not really eating any of it. Then the headwaiter

came with news of his call. The singer sprang up from the table without excusing himself and hurried off to get the phone message.

She couldn't understand what was wrong with him. A few minutes later he returned more jittery than ever. "I have to meet someone," he said. "We're going to leave here."

Marie couldn't believe him. "But they haven't served the main dish yet?"

"It doesn't matter," he told her abruptly. "We can order somewhere else later."

There was no reason to his actions. But she sensed his tension and thought he might very well cause a scene if she objected to leaving with him. So she had no choice but to get up, brave the curious stares of the other diners seated near them, and start out of the restaurant. On the way the singing star left a couple of bills with the headwaiter to cover the cost of what they had eaten.

Outside he hailed a taxi and then gave him an address in the Village. He sat tensely on the edge of the seat urging the driver to make time as they sped downtown. Marie stared at him in disbelief. He was like another person. He bore no resemblance to the relaxed young man she'd known during the weekend on Long Island.

The place they stopped was on a dark, narrow street in the East Village. He told her to wait in the car and promised he'd return in a few minutes. Then he quickly got out of the taxi and hurried across the sidewalk and up some outside steps with

a garbage can on the top one. He vanished into the dark hallway of a shabby brick building with no visible lights.

She waited with growing anxiety. At last she turned to the cabbie and asked, "Do you think he's in any kind of trouble?"

The elderly man behind the wheel shrugged. "How would I know, lady."

"He's never behaved this way before. What can he want in an awful place like that?" She gazed in disgust at the drab tenement building.

"You know him pretty well?"

"Fairly well. But we only met a week or so ago."

The cabbie chuckled grimly. "I'd say you don't know him at all, lady."

She sighed. "I'm beginning to think that."

"I see he wears dark glasses all the time."

"Yes. He's Sonny Bartlett, the pop singing star. It goes with all that."

"Sure," the cabbie said. "I know what you mean. I see plenty of them in this town. You know a lot of those guys are on drugs, don't you?"

She gave a tiny gasp. "You're not saying?"

"I'm not saying anything, miss," the cabbie said. "But he was awful nervous on the way down here."

"I know."

"Kind of a bad sign."

"I can't believe it!"

The cabbie glanced at the shabby house before

which they were parked. "I'd call that the kind of place you might find a fix in. See how he is when he comes out. If he's plenty relaxed I'd watch out."

"I will," she promised nervously. "I'm glad you're with me."

"Don't quote me on any of this, miss," the driver said turning around to her with a worried expression. "I'm not anxious to figure anything out. I'm only a guy shoving a hack around trying to make a living."

"I understand," she said unhappily.

"If he is on the dope I'd kiss him goodbye quick," was the elderly man's warning. "Those hopheads are bad news."

"I'm hoping it isn't anything like that," she said, glancing worriedly at the dark doorway and deserted front steps again.

"Sure, I know how you feel," the cabbie sympathized. "It happens to a lot of nice guys. Especially in the music business."

Their conversation was ended by the appearance of Sonny on the steps of the ancient brick house. He came down them quickly and hurried over to the car and got in.

"Sorry I kept you waiting so long," he told her. And then he gave the cabbie the address of a Dixieland jazz spot in the Forties. He glanced at her again and his smile had lost its tenseness. "Do you like Dixieland? There are times when I dig it."

"Anywhere you like," she said quietly.

"Sorry I spoiled your dinner. We can get food at the Dixieland spot," he said.

"Yes," she said in a small voice. She was watching him closely.

He leaned back against the seat and yawned. "I need to take it easy," he confided in an expansive manner. "Too many hours in the recording studios lately. I need a warm, sunny island for a couple of weeks."

"Perhaps you should go somewhere for a rest," she said.

He stared lazily out the cab window as the taxi moved uptown. "You bet," he said. "That's what I need. A vacation."

"Did you find who it was called you?"

"What?" He turned to her as if he hadn't been listening.

She looked at him hard. "You had to meet someone didn't you? I mean, that was why you rushed downtown so fast."

It was hard to tell his expression with those dark glasses concealing his eyes. After a slight pause, he said, "I had to talk to a fellow about some music. A friend of mine down on his luck. He's written a couple of songs he wants my agent to hear."

"He must be really hard up to be living in a place like that."

Sonny was very relaxed. He made a broad gesture. "You dig how it is. I mean in the music

business you never know. You're floating way up there one day and sunk right down to the bottom the next."

"I suppose so," she said. And all the time she was becoming more fearful that the cabbie had been right, that Sonny was on dope.

At last they arrived in front of the jazz joint. The singer gave the cabbie a bill that included the fare, waiting time and a generous tip. As the elderly man took the money he managed to give Marie a knowing glance. She got the message. He was telling her Sonny spelled trouble.

They went in and the room was fairly jumping with the loud Dixieland jazz. They took a table a distance away from the band and Sonny asked for the menu. He insisted she order some food though she didn't feel like it. She was ill from fear and suspense.

Sonny talked very little to her. He listened to the music in a kind of trance state. Their food came but neither of them paid much attention to it. She sat there feeling sick and unhappy. The young man with the dark glasses swayed his head in rhythm with the beat of the music. She might just as well have not been there.

They stayed about an hour. Then she asked him to take her home. When they arrived at her place she let him come up to the apartment with her. She had some questions to ask him that couldn't be asked in a public place.

Sonny gazed around her modest living room and said, "This is nice, baby."

"It does for me," she agreed. And she put a record on the stereo allowing it to play low. Then she went to the sideboard and prepared drinks for them. They sat on the divan together with Sonny still aloof and relaxed.

Over her drink, she said, "You didn't fool me tonight."

The man with the dark glasses looked at her. "What does that mean?"

"I know, Sonny."

"Know what?"

"Why you made that crazy trip down to the Village!"

He waved his free hand to dismiss the subject. "I explained that. I told you I had to see a friend."

"I know the kind of friend," she said soberly.

He put down his glass on the coffee table. "What is this, some crazy kind of third degree?"

"I want to help you, Sonny," she told him in an earnest voice. "So you might as well be truthful with me. I know you went down there tonight for dope."

The singer laughed shortly and without humor. "You're putting me on!"

"No."

He stared at her. Then in a soft voice, he said, "I ought to be real mad at you for saying a thing like that."

"I want to help," she insisted.

He continued to stare at her. "You want to help, do you?"

"Yes."

"Then never say anything like that again."

"But you'll ruin your health and your career if you go on with that stuff," she warned him. "If Mr. Asmodeus found out what would he think of you? He'd withdraw all the backing he's given you!"

Sonny sat back against the sofa and began to laugh mirthlessly. "You sure have things out of focus, baby!"

She frowned at him. "Why do you say that?"

"Asmodeus knows I'm on the stuff. He makes sure I get it."

She was astounded. "You're lying," she accused him.

"No," he said, shaking his head, "I'm giving it to you straight. It was Asmodeus who put me on the dope. He said it would help make me a star. And it has. I really float when I'm high! Listen to any of my records!"

"You're making it up," she cried. "You're telling me this so I won't say anything to him about you."

The singer's smile was mocking. "I'm telling you the facts, honey. There's more than one of us top names using the stuff. We need it. Asmodeus knows that. He never holds back on anything that's good for business."

The young man's story had a frightening note of conviction. She was beginning to believe he was telling her the truth and this was more shocking than the fact he was an addict.

She said, "You're saying that Mr. Asmodeus doesn't care what happens to you as long as he makes a profit on your talent?"

"That's it, baby."

"He's not that kind of man!"

Sonny's smile was mocking. "How do you know the kind of man he is?"

"He's been my friend!"

"So he has," Sonny said and laughed again.

"Why does that strike you as being funny?"

The young man with the dark glasses studied her with a certain look of pity. "I don't think it's funny, baby. I'm laughing at us not the mess we're in. I'm laughing because we've found us a real good friend!"

Marie was filled with new frustration by his rambling talk. She felt it was the dope talking and not the young singer. She couldn't depend on anything he said while he was in this wretched state. She was certain he'd been maligning Mr. Asmodeus in an attempt to silence her. She was sure their benefactor would have nothing to do with the singer if he knew the truth about him.

She said, "I can't see you again."

"Why not?"

"Not when I know what you are!"

"Lots of the pop music crowd use grass and such," he protested. "It's part of the scene!"

"It isn't part of my scene," she said quietly. "Either you get rid of your habit or give up any idea of my meaning anything to you."

Sonny Bartlett was suddenly more sober. "I need you," he said simply. "You don't change in just a day or two. You must know that."

"I simply want you to make the decision," she said. "We can find out how long it will take later."

He leaned toward her. "For you I'll do it. I'll make it."

"We'll see," she said quietly.

"Just give me a little time."

She eyed him soberly. "I hope you're not just talking words. I'm counting on you."

He took her hand in his. "For you, Marie. Keep on seeing me and I'll manage somehow."

She was looking directly at him. "Is it true? The part about Mr. Asmodeus knowing about your habit? That he has encouraged you to stay on dope?"

Sonny at once looked guilty. "No," he said. "All that part was a lie. I said it so you wouldn't tell him. I don't want you to mention it to him."

"You're sure?"

"That's the truth," he said earnestly.

But she was left feeling it might or might not be.

CHAPTER EIGHT

That night Marie was unable to sleep. The shock of the discovery that Sonny Bartlett was a drug addict coupled with his hints that Mr. Asmodeus knew of his addiction and even encouraged it had been too much. For the first time in her life she drank enough liquor to send her into a drunken stupor and she awoke in the morning with a dreadful hangover.

She arrived at the gallery late and in a jittery state of nerves. The thing she did at once was make herself some strong coffee and then she sat at her desk to drink it. She was on her second cup when the phone rang and made her jump.

Picking up the receiver with a trembling hand she was relieved to hear the voice of the urbane

Mr. Asmodeus at the other end of the line. "I wanted to let you know the Von Klare article will break in the Sunday *Times* this week," he said. "Lucius Barr has given me his word. How are you making out gathering Von Klare paintings?"

"I've a fine collection," she said. "There are a few in the city I haven't been able to buy. But perhaps that is just as well."

"True," the millionaire said. "We need some on the open market to make it lively. Barr will concentrate his article on the ones in the Metropolitan collection and he'll strongly hint Von Klare is a bet for private collectors."

She said, "I'd very much like to have a talk with you."

"Oh?" he sounded cautious.

"Some things have come up. I don't want to go into them on the phone," she said. "I thought if we might meet somewhere."

"I'm very pressed for time."

"I wouldn't bother you if it wasn't important to me."

"Very well," he said. "But I can't make it until this evening. Would you mind returning to the gallery around ten. I'll come by there."

"I'll be waiting for you," she promised.

The day was an ordeal to get through and when she returned home to her apartment that evening she was thoroughly exhausted. But she knew she had to go back to the gallery and talk to Mr. Asmodeus. The thought of it worried her and her

head ached more fiercely than before. She didn't want to seem ungrateful after all he'd done for her but she had to talk to him about Sonny Bartlett's addiction. She had to find out whether he knew about it or not.

She had no desire to harm the singer. In fact she wanted to try and save him from the addiction that would surely destroy both him and his career. What was worrying her was how to go about it? She felt if she had Mr. Asmodeus on her side it would help a great deal. And so she must discuss it with him.

As she battled with these problems she paced up and down in her living room. She missed seeing Hugh and having his solid advice. But the break between them had gone on long enough now to seem final. In her dejection it occurred to her that a drink of vodka might make her feel better. Help her face the millionaire.

So she poured herself a generous drink. The effect was remarkable. It steadied her nerves in a marvelous manner and eased her nagging headache. In fact it went so well she had a second, though less generous drink. Thus fortified she left her apartment to walk to the studio. It was a dark night with a threat of rain in the air but it was warm.

Relaxed by her two vodkas she enjoyed the walk and arrived at the gallery in a better state of mind than she'd been in all day. She busied herself completing some records of sales while she waited

for the millionaire. A few minutes after ten he rapped on the glass door.

She hurried to let him in with a grateful smile on her pretty face. "It was good of you to come," she said.

Mr. Asmodeus was wearing one of his black suits and a Homburg. He gave her a sharp glance and said, "Well, what is all this trouble you wished to see me about?"

She stood before him uncertainly. "I hope you won't be angry with me. I know how busy you are."

"Please go on," he said, the burning eyes studying her.

"And I am grateful to you for everything you've done for me."

"Let us skip that," he told her.

"I'm sorry," she said. And then gathering all her courage she said, "It's about Sonny Bartlett."

"What about him?"

She took a deep breath. Then she said it, "Did you know he is a drug addict?"

The millionaire arched an eyebrow. "Why do you ask me that?"

"I only discovered it last night. I know you've encouraged a romance between him and me. I can't think you'd do that if you knew the truth about him. And he claims you do."

Mr. Asmodeus was silent for a moment. "This is a rather difficult thing for me to explain," he said.

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "I have never actually been informed that Sonny was on drugs until now. Perhaps I have deliberately tried to avoid knowing about it. My reason being that I have a heavy investment in him as a star and anything that would harm his career would be costly to me."

"Drugs will ruin his career!"

The burning eyes met hers. "It's not as simple as that," the millionaire said. "I have had some experience with this problem. To a point the use of drugs can be beneficial to a musical talent of Sonny's type."

"I can't accept that," she protested.

"It has been proven," her dark clad benefactor said calmly. "The difficult thing is to know when the point of ultimate return has been reached and the start of deterioration begins."

Marie listened to this with growing dismay. Asmodeus was discussing Sonny as if he were a manufactured product and not a human being. He was completely impersonal about it and he'd shown no concern on hearing of the young man's dread addiction.

She said, "Aren't you being awfully cold-blooded about this?"

He gave her an icy smile. "I think we both see things in much the same light. As I remember you weren't too gentle in your handling of Jean Martin when you wanted extra paintings from her to save your gallery."

A surge of guilt rushed through her and she felt her cheeks burn. "That was quite different," she protested.

"The pressure made your friend take her life," he said mildly.

"But she would likely have done that anyway," she said unhappily. "You told me that yourself!"

He nodded. "Of course I did. And I meant it. And to make a comparison, it is my feeling that Sonny Bartlett was headed for drug addiction whether I tried to interfere or not. He has a weakness in his nature."

"He's a major talent. You should try to help him!"

Mr. Asmodeus raised a placating hand. "Now it will do no good for you to become hysterical," he said. "Have confidence in me and allow me to help him in my own way."

"Will you?" she asked hopefully. "You're not going to just exploit his addiction and talent?"

"I have a plan," he assured her. "And as part of it I think you should continue to see the young man. There is no doubt you can be a strong influence in his rehabilitation."

"Do you honestly think that?"

"I do," the millionaire said. "Otherwise I wouldn't ask you to keep up the friendship. Great things may come of it for both of you."

"I'm very upset by it all," she confessed.

"I realize that," he said. "But try to understand that drugs can sometimes be used in a beneficial

way. Just as alcohol can. You mustn't allow this knowledge you've gained to confuse you."

"I'm frightened."

"Don't be," the white-haired man said with a warming smile. "And if I sometimes seem severe try to overlook it. I'm really a gentle person and I have the good of all my people at heart."

Marie looked at him with admiration. "I believe that," she said.

"Now the best way to handle this thing is not to ever mention it again to Sonny," he advised. "Pretend that you never had that frank talk with him. That you know nothing about his addiction."

"That won't be easy."

"Of course it won't," he said. "But it will pave the way for him to gain assurance and for me to help him. If he thinks you're looking down on him as an addict it will make my task more difficult."

She listened, trying to understand his viewpoint. "I'll do as you say," she promised.

"You won't regret it," Mr. Asmodeus said. "I must have you both to my place for a weekend again soon. It will do him good to have you around for company. You can't be with him too much. The more he is alone the more he'll be exposed to temptation."

"I'll do anything I can."

"And after that article comes out in the Sunday *Times* we'll be reaping our harvest on Von Klare," the millionaire said happily. "We should make a great deal of money."

"Will I replace the Cheng prints with studies by Von Klare?" she asked. "It seems we should be showing some of them in the display window."

He shook his head. "No. Cheng would be hurt by that. There is no need in any case. Once the public know you have a stock of Von Klares they'll be pounding at your doors to get them."

"I hope your prediction is right," she said. "I've spent most of the money you gave me on them."

"There isn't a question of it," the man in black said confidently.

"A strange thing happened the other day," she said. "A man came in here and insisted he'd painted those monster canvases years ago. He was a very odd sort of old man."

Mr. Asmodeus looked unimpressed. "Some crackpot."

"That's what I decided," she agreed. "He talked wildly about a lot of other things. He told me he'd painted them for a Satanist and suggested that I might be part of some kind of cult and that I was showing the paintings in my window to make this known."

"I hope you got rid of him quickly," the white-haired man said. "Such impudence should not be tolerated."

"I told him to leave or I'd call the police," she said.

"You did exactly right."

"Still it was upsetting."

"Without a doubt," the millionaire agreed. "But you have to expect some annoyance when you are in business."

"I suppose so," she sighed. "I've really been very lucky. Those monster paintings are so grotesque I'm surprised they haven't attracted more attention."

"Cheng has an original talent," Asmodeus said. "One of these days I'll remove the paintings to Long Island."

"Did you know Von Klare included tiny figures of the same bizarre type in all his paintings? Some of them only visible under a glass. Every canvas has a monstrous animal or bird in it but he's done them on such a small scale you don't see them at first."

The white-haired man smiled with grim irony. "So you see others have had the same visions as Cheng. Even as long ago as Von Klare's time."

"There were more of such paintings done in those days," she said. "People believed in monsters and Satan then."

The man standing opposite her in the shadowed gallery arched an eyebrow. "Do you feel Satan has less stature today?"

"I suppose so," she smiled. "Not many people take the devil or hell seriously anymore."

"That's an interesting comment," Mr. Asmodeus said thoughtfully. And then he brightened. "But does this mean his power has diminished?"

"The devil's?"

"Yes."

"I suppose not," she admitted. "The world is still divided between the good and evil things. So the Demon of Darkness must still be very much alive."

"Exactly," Mr. Asmodeus said. "When you return to your painting again why don't you do something to show your beliefs along that line."

She stared at him in surprise. "Do you think it would make an interesting subject for moderns?"

His burning eyes met hers. "Much more exciting than marines and landscapes. If you'll pardon me, I find them rather ordinary."

Marie was considering his suggestion. "You could be right. Perhaps if the theme of the Demon in the modern world was approached in an abstract manner it would be best."

The white-haired man nodded. "You see! You're warming up to the idea already. I can see magnificent possibilities. A pattern of red, black and orange on a white background to suggest the hellfire and brimstone of Dante and the old masters. It's a subject that has been neglected."

"I'll think about it," she promised.

"Do," he said. He put on his Homburg and at the door he paused to turn and say, "You've been under a severe strain and with the Von Klare thing coming you'll be exposed to more tension. You really ought to take something for your nerves."

"I think your advice is good," she agreed.

"And don't worry about Sonny. I'll take care of that problem," he promised her.

"It was just that I wasn't sure you knew," she said, at the door with him.

"I fully understand," he said benignly. "I must say I'm very pleased with you. You have been a dedicated associate of mine and you'll reap your just reward for it."

"I've been very well paid for anything I've done," she said sincerely. "Knowing you has been the most interesting experience of my life."

Mr. Asmodeus smiled benignly. "Even though I have heard those very words many times before it is always good to hear them again. Goodnight, my dear." And with one of his courtly bows he went out into the night and vanished.

She felt a deep sense of relief after her conversation with the millionaire. He had a way of making her realize that everything was going to be all right. She closed the gallery and went back to the apartment. And before going to bed she poured herself another strong vodka. As Mr. Asmodeus had pointed out, just now she needed something to steady her nerves.

The excellent night's sleep she had proved that his advice was sound. And in the several tension-filled days that followed she frequently turned to the vodka bottle for the necessary soothing her jittery nerves demanded. On Friday afternoon Sonny Bartlett called her at the gallery and invited her to a rock and roll revival show at the Felt

Forum. He seemed very much his normal self and because her evenings were dull since her break-up with Hugh she accepted.

Sonny picked her up at her apartment and she was impressed by how well he looked. The concert was enjoyable and afterward they went over to the Statler Hilton bar. As they entered the lobby of the big hotel she saw two familiar figures standing a distance away and tugged the singer's arm.

"Look!" she exclaimed, pointing out Mr. Asmodeus and Helen Beacon.

Sonny followed her glance and at once his gaunt face shadowed. "Don't let on you've seen them," he told her.

She looked up into the face of the young man with the dark glasses. "Why not?" she asked.

"Asmodeus doesn't like to be recognized by any of us. He gets the feeling we're spying on him."

"But that seems ridiculous!"

"You should know by now he's a strange man."

"I had no idea he was so eccentric," she said, taking a final glance at the two as Sonny steered her towards the lounge. Mr. Asmodeus was wearing a dinner jacket and the lovely dark-haired model was in a formal evening gown of some sparkling golden material.

When they were safely seated in a dark corner of the lounge Sonny said, "Regardless of where you meet Asmodeus it would be better if you pretended not to see him. Unless he seeks you out."

Marie stared at him over the vodka which had become a routine drink with her now. "I'm glad you warned me," she said. "I wouldn't have known. What do you suppose they were doing here?"

"Hard to say," the young man with the dark glasses said.

"She's a famous model isn't she?"

"She used to be."

"She isn't anymore?" Marie asked in surprise.

"No," he said, bleakly. "She drinks a lot these days and she makes her living helping him with his deals."

"That doesn't seem healthy for her," Marie said.

"She's well satisfied," Sonny assured her.

"What sort of deals does she help Mr. Asmodeus with?"

He smiled grimly. "That would be too complicated to explain. He has a lot of irons in the fire. She entertains his business associates. Glad hands the strangers in town."

"She's a kind of hostess for him when he entertains?" she suggested.

"Something like that," Sonny agreed.

She drank the remaining vodka in her glass and put it down. Glancing around the darkened room, she said, "Mr. Asmodeus must have a lot of people like us. He's involved in so many things. I never realized it before."

"He has a very large organization."

"And yet he closed up his New York office. At least he doesn't use it any longer except to go there occasionally himself. He's even had the phones disconnected."

"His business is set up on a world-wide basis," the young man with the dark glasses assured her. "He probably felt he could handle the New York situation from his Long Island home."

"That's what he said."

"He's a very clever operator," Sonny assured her. And then seeing her glass was empty, he said, "I'll get you another vodka."

"Thanks."

His tone had a mocking note as he added, "You seem to handle that stuff better than you used to."

She smiled. "I'm discovering its medicinal value."

"An important step," the singer agreed and he hailed the waiter.

She noticed that he hadn't bothered with his drink at all and she seemed to remember reading somewhere that drug addicts had little use for alcohol. But she didn't intend to make any comment. Mr. Asmodeus had warned her to say nothing to Sonny about his addiction. His instructions had been for her to carry on with the young singer as if nothing had happened and that was what she was going to do. Before with her nerves on edge this wouldn't have been easy. But now that she'd discovered how valuable vodka could be as a sedative she was much more relaxed.

"Your drink," Sonny said with a smile as the waiter set another vodka on the rocks in front of her.

"Thanks," she said, and reached for it so quickly that she at once felt embarrassed and was careful not to drink for a moment.

"Asmodeus has been talking about having us out to his place for another weekend," Sonny said casually.

"Oh?"

"I think the weekend after this was the one he mentioned."

"It's a strange house," she said. "The servants move through it like phantoms. Everything is so quiet."

"It has an isolated setting. I guess he built it there because he liked the water and boating."

She'd been carefully timing when she might reach for her drink and felt it wouldn't be considered too hasty at this point. She lifted it to her lips and took a good sip of the refreshing, powerful vodka.

Then she said, "I don't think he's all that fond of the ocean now. The last time I was there we walked to the beach and he talked about the water as if he was afraid of it."

Sonny shrugged. "Maybe he had a bad experience."

"I think that must be it," she agreed. "He began to talk about a storm and being in a boat with huge waves. There was something in his manner

that made my skin crawl." She was also remembering how for a brief moment she'd thought she'd seen seaweed draped around his shoulders as Jean had described the ghostly figure in her nightmares.

"Well, I never question Asmodeus," the singer said in a resigned way. "If he wants to tell me anything I listen. And that's that."

She smiled and took another sip of her drink. "It makes life less complicated."

"My motto is: Do what Asmodeus says and you won't go wrong," Sonny said with a sigh. "You must be making a mint at your gallery these days."

"I'm doing well enough."

"It wasn't that way before he came along."

"No," she admitted.

"Same with me," Sonny said. "I was down and out when he came to me. I can remember the night still. I was playing a small club date in Baltimore and sitting in the rear of one of those dingy bars."

"I can imagine," she smiled.

"It was almost as dark as outside in there and the room was full of smoke," the young man with the dark glasses recalled. He was staring off into space as he talked. "Then I saw him. Standing there with the thin, gray spirals of smoke twisting in the air around his shoulders. With his black cape and white hair he looked like a stage magician who'd wandered into the wrong place. So I asked him where he was doing his act."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing at first. He sat down with me and

stared at me across the table with those funny eyes of his. Ever notice his eyes?"

"You mean the look in them. Sort of a burning expression."

Sonny nodded. "Yes. That's it."

"So?"

"Then he said to me, 'You've got a lot of talent, young man. I heard you singing in that other room a little while ago.' And I said I understood Sinatra was having fits about me. I made him that jealous. I was a pretty flip kid then."

"Did he seem offended?"

"No," Sonny said. "You can't offend Asmodeus if he's in a certain mood. If he sees a chance to create something out of you he doesn't pay any attention to what you say or do. He asked me if I wanted to join him."

"And what did you say?"

Sonny gave a bitter laugh. "I said I wouldn't fit into any magician's act. I was keeping up this joke, see? But he paid no attention to me. He just said he'd like to take me on his payroll and he could build me into a star in a few months. Then I knew he was an agent and I began to listen hard."

"So you signed with him?"

"Sure. What had I to lose?"

"You've not been sorry?"

"Not yet," the young man with the dark glasses said. "Not yet, I haven't. What about you?"

She took another sip of the vodka. "Everything's fine with me."

The young man with the dark glasses stared at her intently. "When did he come to you?"

"One night in the gallery. I was working after hours. I thought I had the door locked but I hadn't. He just walked in."

"Sounds like him."

"I was startled. As you say, he does have an odd appearance when you first meet him. But after awhile you get used to him."

"You do," Sonny agreed. "What was his proposition to you?"

"He was interested in some religious paintings I was showing."

He nodded. "I remember."

"Then he sent that man Cheng to me. Have you met him?"

"A few times. Out at the shore house."

"A very strange little man."

"A lot of them are," Sonny said. "So you put Cheng's monsters in the gallery window?"

"And since then the gallery has been a success. It's incredible," she admitted.

"Don't worry about it," the young man across the table from her advised. "Take it as it comes."

"I intend to."

"You and I have a lot in common."

"You think so?"

"Sure," the singer said. "We've both got talent and we both owe our success to Asmodeus."

She smiled. "That's true. He has offered me a

suggestion for my own painting. I think it's an interesting one."

"Listen to him."

"I will."

"What sort of suggestion did he give you?"

She hesitated. "I'd rather not say just now. I'll tell you later if I decide to go ahead with the project."

"Being mysterious," he chided her.

"Not really," she said. "I don't want to talk about it until I'm sure it's what I want to do."

"Maybe you'll be able to tell me when we go to his place for the weekend?"

"I should have decided by then," she said. Her drink was finished and she felt vaguely anxious to leave the bar. She consulted her watch and saw that it was later than she'd realized. "I must go home," she told him.

"Sure," he said, and made preparations to pay the check.

He kissed her goodnight at the door of the apartment and it was then he made his only reference to his addiction. Looking at her gravely, he said, "Thanks for not saying anything about what happened the other night."

"I want to forget it," she told him following the advice of Mr. Asmodeus.

"Good," he said. "You do that and we'll get along fine."

"Why not?" she smiled.

They talked for a moment or two longer and then she went on up to her apartment. It had been a pleasant evening and yet a strange one. But she could not deny that she and the singer seemed to understand each other far better than she and Hugh ever had. There was something comfortable about their relationship and no hint of possessiveness or jealousy between them. And their association with Mr. Asmodeus also bound them together.

With a sigh she decided it hadn't been a bad evening at all and to make sure she slept well, she poured herself a nightcap of vodka before going to bed.

CHAPTER NINE

The Lucius Barr article on Von Klare appeared in *The New York Times* on Sunday morning. And by the middle of the following week Marie was besieged with orders for the paintings. Collectors and dealers from both in the city and out of it kept her almost continually on the telephone. As a result she had to hire an assistant. At the insistence of Mr. Asmodeus she engaged the weird Tom Cheng to help her.

He proved more efficient than she'd expected and gave her little trouble. Sonny got in touch with her several times but she was too busy to see him. However, they were both to go to the shore home of Mr. Asmodeus for the weekend. Each night when she returned to the apartment she was

exhausted and she found that more and more she needed the soothing comfort of the vodka bottle.

Very often she remained late at the gallery to take care of correspondence. Cheng usually left promptly at five-thirty. He had told her little about himself but she knew he lived in a small hotel on the West Side. There were times when she wondered if Asmodeus had placed him in the gallery to spy on her. In his silent fashion the Chinese missed little. Then she felt guilty at having such suspicions, Mr. Asmodeus had made the gallery a success.

It was on one of those evenings when she was working late that there was a knocking on her door. She left her desk to see who it was and was pleasantly surprised to find Hugh James standing out there. She'd often thought about him, wondered if there were any hopes of a reconciliation between them and suddenly here he was.

She unlocked the door for him. "Welcome, stranger," she said.

Hugh looked sheepish. "I saw your light in the back so I knew you were working late."

"I'm about finished," she said. She studied his pleasant face and gave his dark blue suit and smart trenchcoat an approving eye. "You're looking wonderful."

"Thanks," he said, staring at her hard. "You seem a little tired."

"I am," she sighed. "You know about the run on the Von Klare paintings."

"Yes. According to the papers you own nearly all of them."

"I had a lucky hunch," she said.

"They're bringing fabulous prices, aren't they?" he asked.

"Compared to what they were," Marie admitted. "Bidding soon brings them up in value. Would you like to look at some of the better ones?"

He nodded. "Yes. I've only seen photos of them in the papers."

Marie turned on the overhead lights and took him to the section of the gallery where the majority of the Von Klare paintings were hung. Hugh studied the dark pastoral scenes, moving slowly from one to another of them. It seemed to her he was showing an unusual interest in them.

At last he turned to her and said, "Have you noticed that Von Klare indulges himself in tiny monsters like the large ones you still have in the display window?"

"You mean the Cheng paintings."

"Yes. Only this Von Klare places his weird figures in an obscure area of his canvases. And he always keeps them small in size."

Marie smiled. "You're very observant. I had noticed that but no one else has ever said anything to me about it."

Hugh gave her a thoughtful look. "I think it's odd that Lucius Barr didn't mention it in his article on the artist."

"Perhaps it didn't make any impression on him."

"I can't see why it wouldn't when he was analyzing the artist's style and themes in such detail," the young blond man said.

"I can't explain it," she admitted.

He turned from the paintings and said, "If you're about finished here why don't we go somewhere for a drink?"

"I'd like that," she said. "I won't be a minute."

Even though she was tired she felt a glow of pleasure in being in Hugh's company. It was their first date since the unhappy weekend on Long Island when the young blond man had left in a rage. So far he'd been very casual and kept the talk away from their personal problems. She couldn't help wondering what his feeling towards her was at the moment and if this was an initial step to try and get them together again.

He took her to a quiet lounge around the corner from the gallery where they'd often gone before. It had the usual near dark atmosphere and muzak piped in to mask conversations. When they were comfortably seated in a booth at the rear and had ordered Hugh began trying to explain himself.

"I suppose you wonder why I didn't try to get in touch with you?"

She sat back watching him rather wistfully. "I've missed you. But knowing your state of mind when we parted I assumed you were still angry."

He frowned. "I lost my temper that day."

"Perhaps it wasn't all your fault," she admitted.

"There was something about that place out there worried me," he told her. "Something not quite right. And I could tell Asmodeus was trying to push you and that singer together."

"You shouldn't have let that bother you."

He looked at her bleakly. "You knew it would. So I probably did just what your wily Mr. Asmodeus wanted when I walked out on you. Have you been seeing Sonny Bartlett a lot?"

"Not a lot. We've met a few times."

"I'd not get too friendly with him," Hugh warned. "He's got a bad name. There are some nasty rumors going around about him."

"Oh?"

Hugh looked uncomfortable. "Nothing I'd try to prove but I don't think he's right for you."

"He's no more than a good friend," she said.

The young man across from her sighed. "I'd hesitate to even catalogue him as that."

Hugh was so definitely against Sonny Bartlett that she began to wonder exactly what rumors he'd heard. Was the singer's addiction so well-known that it was being gossiped about? She decided to be especially wary since she had no desire to hurt Sonny.

"Let's not discuss him," she said.

"If that's the way you want it," Hugh agreed. "The trouble is that it's hard to talk about you without including him. I'll try to avoid it. I've been doing a lot of serious thinking."

"And?"

"And I know I was wrong just breaking off with you that way," he said unhappily. "I realize that no matter what, I do love you and want you to marry me."

She smiled at him and stretched a hand out to take one of his. "Probably that's what I've been waiting to hear you say."

A shadow passed from the blond man's face, "Then you are willing to pick up where we left off?"

It was her turn to hesitate. "I'd like to do that, Hugh," she said earnestly. "I really would. But this time we want to be sure."

"I'm sure now."

"So am I, to a point," she told him. "But things have changed for me. The gallery is very successful. It's bound to take a lot of my time in the future."

He gave her a strange look. "Mr. Asmodeus is the key to that, isn't he?"

"Yes. He's been wonderful to me."

"You've not lost him any money," Hugh pointed out.

"But I couldn't have managed the gallery nearly so well without his help," she said.

"You're not going to like what I have to say," Hugh said quietly. "I think you should make a clean break with Mr. Asmodeus. And if he is a partner in the gallery then you should break with the gallery as well."

Her eyebrows raised. "I couldn't do that!"

"Why not? You could return to your own painting."

"But I've worked hard to make the gallery a success! And Mr. Asmodeus has done nothing but good things for me. Why should I turn away from him?"

Hugh looked grim. "I don't know whether I can make you understand that or not."

She was suddenly uneasy, her head was throbbing and she began to think she'd made a mistake agreeing to have this discussion with Hugh. She noticed that her drink was gone. She said irritably, "Please order me another vodka!"

"You're handling them a lot faster than you used to, aren't you?"

Marie crimsoned. "What do you mean?"

"Not too long ago you'd mope for an hour over a single drink. You finished that one in a hurry."

"Because you upset me!"

"I wonder," he said, and he called the waiter and ordered them another round of drinks. Then he told her, "I can see quite a change in you."

"Thank you," she said bitterly.

"I don't mean to be unflattering," he said. "I merely mean you're more tense, seemingly under a strain."

"I have been."

"I blame myself for neglecting you," Hugh admitted.

"Thanks for taking something on yourself," she said.

"I've been doing some more investigating of your Mr. Asmodeus."

"That hardly seems necessary."

"He's the key figure behind all that has happened," Hugh said. "I've been anxious to learn everything I could about him."

The waiter brought their drinks and prevented her from making a quick reply to him. Her nerves were on edge and whether he observed her need for the drink or not she had to take a quick mouthful of the vodka. After it had warmed her throat she felt better able to deal with him.

She said, "Perhaps we shouldn't try to thresh all this out. We don't seem to be doing anything but annoying each other. That's not going to help."

His eyes were fixed on her gravely. "If you'll just give me a fair hearing I promise you I won't tell you anything but facts I feel you should know."

"If you're determined," she said wearily.

"I told you that some months ago Asmodeus closed his New York office though he still has the premises under lease. And that he goes there still at odd hours even though the phones and lights are disconnected."

"Yes."

"Since I found that out I've talked to some business acquaintances of Asmodeus and they claim they hardly see him anymore. When he does meet

them he barely does more than nod and pass right on. This began just before he dismissed his employees and closed his office."

"He is operating his business interests from his home," she defended the millionaire. "And he may have personal reasons for not wanting to talk to some of these men."

"Maybe," Hugh said grimly. "According to what they say Asmodeus used to be a boating enthusiast. He had the reputation of being hard in business, perhaps not even entirely honest, and tight-fisted. But the things he enjoyed spending money on were his Long Island house and his boats."

"He no longer does any boating," she said.

"So I understand," Hugh agreed. "And the odd part of it is this change in his attitude began when he was caught out in a boat during a bad storm and almost drowned. He was missing overnight and when he returned he seemed to have undergone a personality change."

She took another sip of her drink. "Why should this concern me?"

"Because you are dealing with the Asmodeus of today. The one none of his old associates seem to understand. There are rumors his mind may have been twisted by his ordeal. At any rate it's known he sold the large boat and soon after closed his office. Since then he's been largely a recluse at his Long Island place. Why?"

"I think he's been busier than a lot of people

guess," she said. "He's managed the career of Sonny Bartlett and he's promoted my gallery."

"The link between he and Bartlett needs some explaining, too," Hugh said. "Managing a pop singer is not the sort of thing Asmodeus usually did."

"He could take on new interests."

"Perhaps. But Bartlett isn't exactly a snow-white character. There are stories that a Mafia syndicate is interested in him and some people claim he's a junkie."

Marie tried to hide her concern. "They tell stories like that about a lot of the pop musicians."

"I've heard it repeated enough to think there may be something to it," the young man across from her said.

"I wouldn't know."

"Still it's wise you should hear what's being said," Hugh told her. "And there are rumors about that house on Long Island."

"You seem to deal in nothing but rumors," she rebuked him.

He frowned. "All these things are too shadowy to be proven facts but some of the neighbors of Asmodeus claim he is holding weird meetings at his place. That he is operating some kind of black magic headquarters there and that this was going on before he had his change of personality."

"I don't believe it," she said.

His eyes met hers. "Yet your gallery only began to prosper after you put those monster paintings in

your display window. How do you know they weren't a signal to members of the Satanist group Asmodeus has organized?"

"You must be joking!" she protested, yet she felt a beginning of fear. Things had developed strangely after she'd displayed the paintings and many of those first customers had been bizarre in appearance and manner. She had been surprised at their interest in art. Could there be some sinister explanation for it as Hugh was insisting?

"I wish I were joking," he said worriedly. "But I'm not. I'm convinced that Asmodeus is the leader of some cult devoted to the worship of black magic and the devil. And he has persuaded his members to support you just as they support Sonny Bartlett or any other personality he decides to push."

"All this is guesswork on your part," she protested.

"I'll admit that," he said. "But there are other facts I haven't told you yet. Facts that support what I've said."

"Go on." She gulped down the last of the vodka. Not even its burning pleasantness could keep her from trembling slightly.

"Lucius Barr is known as a devotee of black magic. It has been a lifetime hobby with him. And he wrote that article on Von Klare."

"So?"

"So at once there was a run on his paintings. And you just happened to have most of Von

Klare's remaining work in your gallery. Who gave you the tip the Von Klares would soon be valuable?"

It was a direct question and she hesitated before replying. Then, she said, "I don't think it has any importance. Mr. Asmodeus told me the article was going to be published. He apparently knows Lucius Barr and they discussed the piece before it was put in the paper. He decided the Von Klares would be valuable and gave me money to buy all I could."

"So it was Asmodeus and Lucius Barr working together who started the rush on Von Klare paintings. And they are both mixed up in Black Magic. Doesn't that add up?"

"You haven't convinced me yet," she told him. But he had bothered her a good deal though she wasn't admitting it. She'd wondered about the cooperation between the art critic and the millionaire. And she'd debated just how ethical her own role had been in cornering the market on Von Klares through a leak in information.

"Then how about this?" he said leaning over to her, his face serious, and his voice modulated to suit the shadowed bar. "I've looked up Von Klare and read his history. Did you know he was a suicide?"

"Yes."

"Do you also know he was a member of a Satanist circle?"

"It's the first I've heard of it. He was an obscure

painter of whom not much has been written," she protested. "I haven't actually read anything about him other than the *Times* article."

"Then you know far from the entire story."

"Go on," she said.

"Von Klare was accused of being a Satanist more than once. The first time was when he was living in France. He was asked to leave the country and returned to his native Holland. There his behavior aroused the interest of the authorities. He was before the courts for dealing in black magic once again."

"What has all that to do with me?"

"I'm trying to show you the line that flows through all this. All of these people have been tainted with an association with Satanist activities."

"But Von Klare lived and died a century ago!"

"Only to have his work revived by Lucius Barr and your Mr. Asmodeus. Was the revival the result of their genuine interest in the artist or their wish to promote someone of their own black cult?"

"I think you're talking fantasy," she protested.

"You saw the tiny monster figures in Von Klare's paintings. The same as the large ones in your display window. Creatures grotesque enough to make your flesh crawl!"

"You're telling me my success is due to my being linked with some kind of black magic worshipers," she said.

"Yes."

"But I've never heard the subject mentioned. Mr. Asmodeus has been scrupulous to discuss nothing but business. He has always been reserved and a gentleman where I've been concerned."

"So far," Hugh said.

She frowned. "What does that mean?"

"I'm aware of a change in you, even if you aren't. I can notice your tenseness and the fact you're drinking more than you used to."

"I'm not overdoing it," she argued angrily.

"I didn't suggest you were," Hugh said. "I'm merely sticking to facts. I have an idea that soon you'll be exposed to the dark truth about the kind of people you're mixed up with. You'll be discovering the kind of man Mr. Asmodeus really is and I want you to be prepared for it."

"You've certainly accused him of enough evil."

"No more than is true," he said quietly. "Next Asmodeus may want to introduce you to his Satanist circle and try to make you become one of it. You have to be wary."

"I'm sure it won't happen," she said. But she was recalling some of the things the millionaire had said. And some of the people who had come to the gallery. For one, that strange old man who claimed he was the artist who had painted the Gothic monsters and not Cheng.

Hugh said, "I didn't mean to go on so long about this but I had to tell you my suspicions. When can I see you again?"

She sighed deeply. "I don't know. I'm terribly busy."

"You're not just saying that because you resent what I told you?"

"No. The Von Klare thing is still very big."

"What about the weekend?"

She hesitated a moment. "I've promised to go to Long Island for the weekend," she said.

He gave her a look full of meaning. "I see," he said quietly.

"I can't very well refuse to go now. Not at the last minute."

"I suppose not."

"But I will keep what you said in mind," she promised. "And I'll try to discover if there really is anything strange about Asmodeus and that house."

"At least you've been warned," he said.

She nodded. "I know you told me to help me."

"There could be no other reason. I don't care what Asmodeus is. But I do care about what he does to you. I'll count on you to get in touch with me as soon as you get back from Long Island."

"I will," she promised.

"I'll be worried," he told her. "I'll expect a call from you."

"You'll get it," she said. "And now I really have to go home."

Hugh escorted her back to the apartment and kissed her goodnight before he left her. To all intents the rift between them had been healed. Yet

there was still an awkwardness between them. She felt that he was motivated by a desire to help her but he was exaggerating a lot of idle rumors in his accusations against Asmodeus.

She still had to believe in her benefactor. It was normal for all kinds of wild rumors to be circulating about rich and powerful men. Without a question Asmodeus was a victim of such rumors. She owed all her success to him and there could be no disputing that. He couldn't be blamed for Sonny Bartlett's dependence on drugs. In fact he'd promised to try helping him shake the habit. With these thoughts in mind she poured the usual nightcap of vodka and went to bed.

Still, Hugh's warning had made an impression on her and the next day at the gallery she waited for a suitable opportunity to question the thin, morose Chinese, Tom Cheng. Her chance came just after the lunch hour when the gallery was empty except for them.

She said, "Cheng, how did you come to do those paintings in the window?"

The thin man stared at her blankly from behind his thick, horn-rimmed glasses. "Do not understand?" he said.

Marie was sure that he did and had no wish to answer her. She said, "I'd like to know the meaning of your paintings? I've seen some of the same kind of monsters in the Von Klare canvases only they are smaller and concealed in the backgrounds. What do they signify?"

Cheng looked guilty. "Come from mind," he said. "I have visions."

She studied him keenly. "Are you sure you did do those paintings? Or are they the work of another artist?" She was remembering the weird old man.

Cheng glared at her. "Ask Mr. Asmodeus," was his unsatisfactory reply.

"I will," she said, "since you don't want to tell me."

His reply was to turn his back on her and pretend to be busy with packing one of the Von Klare paintings that was being shipped out. She was troubled by his behavior and at once began to believe the story the old man had told her. It seemed certain that the Chinese had been lying, that the paintings weren't his. He'd only acted as an agent for the millionaire in bringing them to her as he was now probably acting as a spy.

She did not see Asmodeus during the next few days. Saturday arrived and she left the gallery at noon to pack her things at the apartment. Sonny Bartlett was coming by for her around two o'clock. She'd barely reached the apartment and begun to pack when the phone rang. It was Hugh.

"I wanted to catch you before you left," he said.

"I'm starting to get ready now," she told him.

"Be careful," he warned.

"I will," she said.

"You may get a chance to talk to one of the servants there," Hugh suggested. "If you do have

a chance to ask any questions, try to find out what happened the night Asmodeus was caught out in that boat."

There was something in his tone that made her believe he placed a lot of importance in this. She said, "Is there anything special you'd like to know about it?"

"Just the general account," he said. "I've never been able to get the story straight. I mean, beyond the fact he was caught out in the storm and they didn't see him until the next morning. And he's hated boats ever since."

"If I get a chance I'll bring it up," she said. "Would it do to question him?"

"I think that would be a bad error," Hugh said quickly.

"If you say so."

"You may be dealing with an insane man," he warned her. "And that could be a subject on which he is sensitive."

"I hadn't thought of that," she admitted.

"Be careful what you say to Sonny Bartlett as well."

"I always am," she said.

"And don't forget to call me tomorrow night no matter how late it is when you return."

"Suppose I don't come back until early Monday morning," she said. "Mr. Asmodeus hinted about something like that. We might stay overnight Saturday and Sunday."

"Then call me at the office when you get in Monday," he said.

She sighed. "I think you are making far too much fuss about all this."

"We'll soon know," was his reply. "Remember I love you."

"I will," she said, her tone gentle, touched by his blunt sincerity.

"So I'll be worrying every minute."

"I'll remember," she said, "and you'll hear from me either Sunday night or Monday morning."

The phone conversation ended on this note. Some of Hugh's concern had now begun to bother her, together with his warnings and the discovery that Cheng had probably not done those paintings. It was all part of an eerie series of events which had followed one on another so gradually she hadn't realized how great a control the mysterious Asmodeus and his friends had come to wield over her.

Now she realized she must begin to question some of these happenings. She wouldn't venture to challenge Asmodeus himself about them but she could try quietly to pick some facts up one place and another. Eventually she would know whether Hugh's accusations were fantasies or based on truth as he'd insisted.

It seemed to her that she might ask Sonny Bartlett a few questions. While she didn't depend on the drug-addicted singer to any great extent she

did feel that he was her friend and there were some things they could discuss which she could not broach to Asmodeus.

Sonny arrived promptly and took her bags down to the car. When she was seated beside him and they were well along the express-highway towards the shore home of Asmodeus she began to quizz him.

"Have you ever heard any strange stories about the shore house?" she asked.

He gave her a brief glance from the wheel. "What kind of stories?"

"Someone told me that Mr. Asmodeus held black magic meetings at his place," she ventured.

Sonny's gaunt face became more than normally bleak. "Where did you hear that?"

She was anxious not to involve Hugh and she had no intention of revealing the source of her information. She quickly said, "I forget, but someone mentioned it."

The young man with the dark glasses gave her a warning look. "If you're wise you'll forget you ever heard it!"

CHAPTER TEN

They were driving along a road crowded with heavy traffic. She sat silent for a moment considering his reply. The brilliant, warm afternoon sun reflected on the cars they passed and it seemed to her that Sonny was driving beyond the speed limit and rather recklessly. She began to worry that he might be high on drugs.

She warned him as they zig-zagged in passing a fast-moving car. "You're taking a lot of chances today."

"I dig speed," was his laconic reply.

"You'll be digging a ticket if one of the cruisers catch you driving like this," she said. "They're liable to have radar at any section along here."

"It's fun to take chances once in awhile," the singer said, humming to himself.

"You take far too many."

The young man with the glasses glanced at her again. "Meaning what?"

"Nothing in particular," she said.

"Don't nag me, baby," was his advice. "This is how it is!"

She sighed. "I don't think I should have agreed to this weekend."

"You shouldn't have if you plan third-degreeing Asmodeus about black magic," he said, returning to her earlier topic of conversation.

"Doesn't Asmodeus like to discuss it?"

"Not if you mention it first," the singer said. "If that comes up, let him be the one to introduce it."

"It's a kind of forbidden subject then," she said.

"We've got it pretty good, baby," the singer said. "We'd be wise not to get too curious."

"Thanks for telling me," she said.

"No charge," he assured her in his mocking fashion as he stepped hard on the gas.

She winced as the sports car fairly leapt ahead. "Please!" she begged him.

He laughed at her wildly. "Groovy, eh, baby?"

"Asmodeus won't thank you if you get yourself arrested," she warned him. "And you could be in trouble if they find you're on drugs."

His face went grim. "That wasn't to be mentioned!"

"You forced me to say it. Please drive slower!"

He made no reply but he did ease the speed of the car a little. They finally turned off the express-

way and took a side road. Once again the singer drove recklessly but not at the same speed as when he'd been on the wider road. She sat tensely in the car and prayed that they would soon reach their destination.

They were passing an area of shabby, all-year houses occupied by laborers on the various estates and other low-income people. The houses were small and fairly wide apart. They rounded a small curve when suddenly an elderly man carrying a half-window sash appeared on the road in front of them. By the time Marie screamed a warning he was directly in the middle of the road.

At the speed Sonny was driving there was no way of stopping the car to avoid hitting him. The singer let out an oath and twisted the steering wheel to the left but as he did the old man became confused, dropped the sash he'd been carrying and stumbled back so that he was again in the path of the car.

There was no chance of avoiding him. Marie lifted her hands to her mouth and let out a scream. Sonny made a last effort to miss the old man and failed. The car wavered then hit the man and sent him up into the air above the hood of the car. The car gave a hint of going out of control and then Sonny regained mastery of the wheel as they speeded on.

Marie turned to him frantically. "You didn't stop!"

He kept his gaze straight ahead. "Do you think I'm crazy?" he snapped.

"You must have killed him," she cried, on the verge of hysteria.

"All right! So do you expect me to go back?" The singer's voice was harsh.

"You have to!"

"That's where you're wrong, baby," he said curtly. "No one saw us!"

"What does that matter?"

"It makes all the difference, baby," the young man with the dark glasses said.

"You don't care that you killed someone?" she demanded incredulously.

"It doesn't matter whether I care or not, I'm not about to take the blame for it if I can help it!"

"Someone probably did see you! You'll be in a better position if you go back than if you are accused of being a hit-and-run driver!"

He hadn't eased his speed any at all as they bombed down a second side road close to the shore house. "That's a chance I'm willing to take," he breathed grimly.

"You're crazy with drugs! Sonny! Please!"

"Just don't talk to me, baby," he said tensely. "Just don't get in my way!"

There was something so vicious in his manner she fought back her rising hysteria and became silent for a few moments. It was still hard to believe that what had happened hadn't been part of a dreadful nightmare. But she knew it had been real.

Far too real! And now she sat there stunned and shattered. Hugh had warned her against the dangers of the company she was keeping but she'd never expected it to come to this.

Sonny brought the sports car to a grinding halt in the asphalt paved yardway of the shore house. Then he jumped out and went around to the front of it to grimly inspect it for damage. She took a deep breath and still fighting for control followed him out.

"No harm done," he said with satisfaction. "Not even a dent or bloodstain!"

"Sonny," she begged, "you have to go back and see how badly hurt that poor man is!"

His reply was a disgusted look. Then he turned and strode off towards the front entrance of the house without even bothering to remove her bags from the car. She stood there still stunned from the tragic accident and not knowing quite what to do next. After a moment, she walked towards the front of the house and saw the lovely model, Helen Beacon, in a bathing suit sitting in a chaise lounge under an umbrella over by the pool.

Thinking she might gain some comfort from the lovely girl's company she went quickly towards her. But when she got close she saw that Helen was asleep and apparently it was a drunken sleep. A liquor bottle was on the table beside her along with a glass nearly full of the amber liquid. The lovely face was blurred with an alcoholic paralysis. Frustrated and despairing she turned away

from the sad spectacle and walked slowly to the opposite end of the pool.

There she found a chair and sat in it, her eyes staring straight ahead, her expression one of terror. The full horror of her plight now filled her. She was a party to the crime. Unless she at once went to the police and exposed Sonny as the driver of the car she would be considered equally guilty with him. But she knew if she gave the singer's name to the police it would be the end of his career. And Mr. Asmodeus would not approve of that!

Approve or not she knew what she must do. And she couldn't take long in doing it. Whether she incurred the wrath of Mr. Asmodeus or not she had to inform on Sonny. She was certain he'd been high on drugs and not responsible but that made no difference. He'd heard her urging to stop and find out how badly the man was injured and he'd refused to listen to her. Now it was too late. He was guilty of a hit-and-run accident. He'd placed himself in that position and she couldn't feel pity for him. It was for the unfortunate old man she suffered. His wanton killing had sickened her!

She was coming to Hugh's conclusion that Asmodeus brought a black shadow to everyone associated with him. The sight of the drunken Helen Beacon asleep in the chaise lounge had been shocking in itself but it was nothing compared to what she'd just gone through. The drunken model

was a grim warning of what she might be heading for. She knew all too well how heavily she'd been relying on the soothing comforts of vodka in the last few weeks. And Sonny Bartlett's drug addiction had finally trapped him in tragedy.

Mr. Asmodeus had promised her he'd work to save Sonny. But she had witnessed no results of it. She began to believe that Hugh was right, the white-haired millionaire was either totally evil or insane in his desire for power over people and things. Her head was reeling and she sat there with growing fears. Suppose they would not let her report the truth to the authorities?

She heard the click of footsteps on the concrete of the pool side and then a hand touched her shoulder. "Steady, my dear, I know all about it." It was Mr. Asmodeus addressing her in a reassuring tone.

She turned and looked up at him with eyes brimming with tears. "Sonny ran an old man down!"

The white-haired man nodded gravely. "I've just heard the whole story from him."

"He wouldn't stop!"

"That was wrong," the millionaire agreed with a sigh.

"I tried," she exclaimed tearfully. "I did all I could to make him!"

"I haven't a doubt of that."

"I'm sure the man must be dead. We hit him at a terrific speed!"

Mr. Asmodeus gave her a troubled look. His swarthy, hawk-face seemed more lined than usual. "I want you to pull yourself together, Marie," he said. "You mustn't allow yourself to go to pieces this way."

"I can't help it!"

"Things need not be as bad as they seem," he told her.

"Nothing can change what happened," she said brokenly.

"Don't be too sure."

"I have to get in touch with the police," she said. "I have no choice if Sonny doesn't do it himself."

The white-haired man nodded. "I understand all that. First, I want you to come into the house with me. I've had a servant bring in your luggage."

She got to her feet with the dazed manner of a sleepwalker. "I still can't think straight," she told him. "I still see that poor old man. The awful look of fear on his face when he knew we were going to hit him. Then the thud of the impact of his body."

"You mustn't dwell on such things," Mr. Asmodeus told her. And placing a comforting arm around her he guided her along the pool side to the front walk and into the dark, cool living room of the fine mansion. He sat her in a big armchair and then brought her over a drink.

She stared at the liquor and hesitated. "No, I shouldn't! Not now! I need a clear head!"

"You'll not have one without something to calm

your nerves," he said, those burning eyes fixed on hers. "You need this."

She met his glance then faltered. "Perhaps I do," she said and took the drink.

"Don't stare at it," he told her, "drink it!"

She took a gulp of the strong liquid. She felt its pleasant warmness coursing down her throat. And she asked, "Where is Sonny?"

"He's gone."

"Gone?" she gasped.

"Yes," the white-haired man said calmly. "I decided it would be best if he left here. I've sent him back to the city."

"And he hasn't reported the accident?"

There was a strange look on the millionaire's face. "No. I asked him to allow me to look after that."

Marie had taken more of the drink and already felt some better. "You're going to tell the police?"

"I am," he said. "It happens that I'm well known to the local officers. I can approach them much better than Sonny."

"He'll still be guilty of a hit-and-run driving charge. Perhaps a manslaughter charge if the old man was killed."

"He understands that. I've warned him of the seriousness of his position and told him I cannot condone what he has done. I cannot protect him in this."

Marie listened to the grim words of the white-haired man and began to feel guilty for doubting

him. There was no question that he was prepared to do the right thing. She had been too quick to condemn him.

She said, "Have you called the authorities yet?" She was still confused and unable to remember clearly what he'd said. She took the last of her drink.

Mr. Asmodeus frowned. "No. I'm about to do that now. I'll inform them what happened and where they can find Sonny. But I wanted to discuss the whole business with you first."

"Discuss what?"

"Let me fix you another small one," he said, taking her glass and crossing to the bar. As he prepared her a second drink, he stood so that he could go on talking to her. "You are rather deeply involved in this as you pointed out."

"I want to let them know what happened," she said dully.

"Of course you do," he said urbanely as he came back and put the second drink in her hand. "But before we make that giant step it seems to me there are things to be considered."

"What?" she stared up at him.

"Can you accomplish any good for anyone, Sonny or the victim, by admitting you were in the car?"

"I was with Sonny! I saw it happen! I tried to stop him!" Her voice rose as she emphasized these things.

He raised a hand for her to speak more softly

and leaned towards her with those hypnotic, burning eyes meeting hers. "We both know all that," he said. "But your being in the car made no difference! No difference at all! You were in no way responsible for the accident so why should you suffer?"

"I have to tell the truth."

"What truth?" the millionaire asked with disgust. "Is the truth important in this case? All it can do is get you mixed up in a disgraceful episode and cause you a loss of time. And for nothing!"

She had taken another gulp from her drink. Her head was no longer aching but she was confused. "If I don't tell I was there I'll be as bad as Sonny!" she said plaintively.

"I'm going to speak for that young man," the millionaire said sternly. "And I say it is to your advantage to forget you ever were in that car. You came down here with me in my car and you know nothing about the accident."

"But I do! I'll never be able to erase it from my mind!"

"Now you're being foolishly melodramatic," Mr. Asmodeus said sharply. "I'm certain you'll nicely get over this. I can't afford to have you taken away from the gallery at this time when the Von Klare business is at its height!"

She stared at him anxiously. "You want me to pretend I know nothing about the accident?"

"I want you to convince yourself that you were never in Sonny's car."

"That won't be easy."

"You can do it," he assured her. "Now I'm going to leave you for a little to finish your drink while I go put a call through to the proper authorities. You will not be dragged into it." With that final word he left her.

She sat there with closed eyes for a moment. Was he right? Perhaps so. She'd not contributed to the accident in any way. There had been no chance for her to prevent it. She'd screamed a warning to Sonny but he'd been speeding so that there was no chance of stopping the car. So she'd sat there and saw it happen, a helpless on-looker.

She would only be important to the case if Sonny attempted to escape without reporting the accident. This was something she couldn't condone. But Mr. Asmodeus was going to give the authorities a full account of what had happened and let them know where they could reach the singer. He'd apparently made it plain to Sonny that he must take responsibility for his crime. So the millionaire was right, it would serve no purpose for her to become involved.

Having decided that Marie felt less tense. She still was concerned about the accident victim. And now she began to hope that by some miracle he hadn't been as badly hurt as she thought. She went on with her drink and as the vodka warmed her she began to feel a little more hopeful. It mightn't turn out as tragically as she'd feared. She must try to fight negative thoughts.

She was still sitting there when the millionaire came briskly back into the room. In his dark suit and black tie he was the picture of dependability and the establishment. She at once saw that he looked less worried.

He said, "I've had a talk with the police."

"Yes?" she waited for more information.

"You're going to be relieved," he said with a grim smile. "The old man wasn't hurt badly after all. Merely shaken up."

She was on her feet. "You mean he's not dead?"

He nodded. "He's not even badly hurt!"

"That's wonderful," she exclaimed. "I'm so glad for him. And I'm happy for Sonny as well. I hope this will be a lesson for him."

"I have no question that it will," the millionaire said dryly. "So you see there was no need for hysterics after all."

"It was a shocking experience," she reminded him. "One I don't think I'll ever forget."

"There's no question of that," he agreed.

"What about Sonny? Does he know the good news?"

"Not yet."

"I suppose the police will let him know when they get in touch with him," she said with a sigh. "Will they be easier on him now? What will they charge him with?"

The white-haired man cleared his throat. "That is another matter."

"I don't understand."

The burning eyes fastened on her. "Sonny allowed me full jurisdiction in his case. He gave me permission to handle it all as I saw fit. And when I learned that the accident victim had escaped serious injury I told the police I'd made the inquiry because someone had phoned me that there'd been an accident."

The meaning of his words slowly came through to her. "You didn't mention Sonny?"

"No," he said. "Why should I have? You know that he is still on drugs in spite of all I've tried to do. If he were arrested they'd discover that at once and his career would be destroyed. I saw no point in sacrificing him for a minor case of injury."

She stared at the millionaire. "You didn't report he was the driver of the car or anything?"

"No. The police have no idea who it was. So I let it rest at that."

"But Sonny shouldn't get off without some punishment," she protested. "It's not right!"

"I'll take care of his punishment," the millionaire assured her. "And I'll also see the accident victim is given a good cash payment for his injuries. I have the reputation of being a philanthropist in this area and I shall personally give the poor man a generous amount."

She studied him in awe. "The way you're arranging it you might think the accident had never happened."

"Isn't that all to the good?" he asked.

She shook her head in a dazed fashion. "I don't know."

"The only unpleasant result will be a spoiled weekend for you," he said. "You'll miss the company of our young singer friend. But I'll try to make it up to you."

"Maybe you should take me back to the city," she said.

"I wouldn't think of allowing you to travel without a rest to get over your shock," the millionaire said. "I have some friends coming to join me tomorrow evening and I'd like to have you here to meet them."

"Perhaps I'll feel better by then," she said. And then remembering, she added, "I saw Helen Beacon by the pool when I arrived. I didn't talk to her because she was sleeping."

His swarthy face took on a shadowed expression. "I am having problems with that young woman," he snapped. "I have showered generosity on her and given her everything a girl could ask and she repays me by drinking herself into a coma every chance she gets."

"Perhaps she can't help herself," Marie said. "She may need treatment."

"I am considering that," her host said curtly. "Now I'll have the housekeeper show you to your room."

Her room was the same one as last time. But she couldn't help thinking how different her situation had been then. Hugh had been there with her and

none of the startling things that had happened since had been dreamed of by her. She felt older and wearier. And while she still believed that Mr. Asmodeus was essentially good, she had the feeling she would like to break her association with him, that she would be happier turning over her share of the gallery to him and returning to her painting as a career. Then there was always the prospect of her marriage to Hugh to look forward to. The thought made her sigh happily.

But the delicate business of broaching this matter to Mr. Asmodeus would have to be carefully timed. She wouldn't dare do it until the Von Klare thing had run its course. The profits of the sales of the Von Klare paintings should put the millionaire in a happy frame of mind. Then, when things were at a high point, she might beg weariness and get his agreement to buy out her share of the gallery.

She knew it was what she wanted to do. With Cheng there in the gallery with her she felt as if she were being spied on. At the best she had a closed-in feeling. And she wanted nothing more to do with the reckless Sonny Bartlett who was surely heading for bad things. She didn't want to be there again when another crisis came. She knew the singer was doomed and while she felt pity for him, there was no deeper emotion involved.

It had taken all that she'd gone through to know Hugh had the only claim to her heart. He'd even endured her stupid flirtation with Sonny and forgiven her for it. And he'd gone out of his way to

dig up information about Asmodeus in an effort to protect her. Perhaps he'd relied too heavily on the exaggerated rumors which built up around such men as Asmodeus, but he had certainly tried to get at the truth.

Stretched out on her bed in the darkened room with the roar of the nearby surf in her ears she wondered what exactly was the truth? She did not know it. And she was sure much of what Hugh had told her had been wild rumor. But there was a mystery about the man and about this house. You couldn't help feeling that. There was an eerie atmosphere about the mansion you sensed as soon as you were in it.

She still wasn't sure she was satisfied with the way the mysterious millionaire had settled the accident thing but if no one was badly hurt perhaps he'd done what was best. She hated to judge him in this, especially as he'd acted to keep her discreetly out of it from the start. She mustn't forget that.

Exhausted by her experiences and relaxed by the vodka she'd taken she fell into an uneasy sleep. Almost at once she began to dream. It was dark midnight and a grimly smiling Mr. Asmodeus was leading her down a shadowed, stone passage. It seemed endless and finally far ahead of them there appeared a glow of light. As they drew closer to it she saw that it was an altar with a thick, black candle burning on it. But it was an altar such as she'd never seen before.

Turning to the millionaire, she asked, "What kind of altar is this?"

"This is a temple dedicated to Beliar," the white-haired man said in sepulchral voice that echoed in the dungeon-like place.

"Beliar?" she repeated.

"Whom you'd know better as Satan," Asmodeus said with one of his cold smiles.

"Why have you brought me here?"

"To serve in the Black Mass."

"No!" she moved back from him and saw that now he wore black robes rather than the black suit that was so familiar. A gold locket of an odd design hung from his neck.

"My disciples shall gather and you shall play your part in our rituals," he intoned. "We shall use a bough of wild hazel that has not yet produced fruit and cut it with a new knife before sunrise."

"You're mad!" she said. "I should have known it before!"

The white-haired man laughed. "Then we shall introduce a bloodstone and two candles of black wax. We shall trace a triangle on the floor before you with the bloodstone and place the candles on it. And then we shall bless you and offer you the *pactum tacitum,* your bond with Satan!"

Before he had finished speaking she turned and fled out of the dungeon and down the endless black corridor. She screamed out her fears as she heard him coming after her. She was racing

blindly not caring where as long as she escaped the madman.

She came to a turn in the corridor and then from a side area sprang Sonny Bartlett. The pop singer blocked her way with a crazy smile on his face and quickly raised his hands and she saw they were dripping with blood!

"You've killed him!" she cried out, halting.

The smile vanished from his face to be replaced by an expression of hatred. "No!" he said harshly and he came towards her, the bloodstained hands stretched out to grasp her.

"Don't touch me!" she screamed. "Don't touch me!"

She sat up in alarm and then realized she'd been dreaming and that she was alone in the darkened room. The vivid nightmare still tormented her. She stared into the semi-darkness and wondered what the dream had meant. Or had it meant nothing but a distorted reflection of her thoughts and fears before she'd gone to sleep.

One thing she was convinced of—the accident would continue to intrude on her dreams for a long time to come. She'd suffered an emotional shock from which it would take time to recover. She tried to think of some good excuse to ask Mr. Asmodeus to take her back to the city. It would seem what she'd gone through would be sufficient but he'd used that as an excuse to keep her there resting.

She lay back on the pillow and closed her eyes. Perhaps if she spoke to him again in the morning and complained of feeling badly he would change his mind and drive her back early. She had no desire to remain Sunday evening and meet the friends he'd spoken of. All she wanted was to get back to the security of her apartment and phone Hugh.

It was unlikely she'd sleep again. In a short while it would be time to dress for dinner. She didn't feel like it but knew Mr. Asmodeus would expect it. She was debating what to wear when she was suddenly alerted by a step outside her bedroom door. It made her start and raise herself on an elbow. Her eyes were fixed on the door.

And then, as if on cue, the door began to open very slowly, little more than an inch at a time. She felt herself go taut with fear. Finally the door opened wide enough to reveal a disheveled and frightened-looking Helen Beacon. The dark girl wore a green robe over her bathing suit.

Seeing Marie was there and awake she took a step into the room and gasped, "I had to see you. I've something to tell you!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A wave of sympathy replaced her fear as she looked into the puffed, unhappy face of the once lovely model. She swung off the bed and went over to her. "Helen, what's wrong?" she asked.

The large green eyes of the model fixed on her with distress in them. "You don't know!" she said brokenly.

Marie took her by the arm. "Don't know what?"

"This house," the dark girl said, "and what goes on here."

"What are you trying to tell me?" Marie said.

Helen's voice wavered. "Leave here!"

"Why?"

"Evil," the lovely model said. "Nothing but evil."

"What sort of evil?"

"Starts with him," Helen said brokenly. "It all started with him. I was beautiful once!" And she began to sob.

"You're still beautiful," Marie comforted her. "Just try to calm yourself and tell me what I should know."

"Like Sonny," Helen said.

"Sonny?"

"Broken," Helen said with utter despair. "Sonny and I both broken! And now it's your turn!"

Marie was listening with an increased feeling of terror. Helen was trying to warn her of the evil in the silent mansion. The evil which had engulfed her and Sonny and now stretching out to threaten a third person. And Marie knew that third person was herself.

She started to question the dark girl further when all at once a grim figure presented itself in the open doorway. It was Mr. Asmodeus who had apparently followed Helen there.

In a steely voice, he ordered the model, "Come along with me, Helen. You've made enough of a nuisance of yourself!"

The model turned to him in obvious fear. "No. Let me stay here!"

The white-haired man grasped her roughly by the arm. "It will do you no good to cause a scene!"

Marie spoke up, "She isn't bothering me. I don't mind if she stays."

The burning eyes of the black clad man fixed on her. "Helen has been misbehaving. And she must be disciplined!" And with that comment he dragged her from the room and out of sight down the hallway. The lovely dark girl made a whimpering sound as she accompanied him.

Marie stood there a moment in consternation. This scene had been as unbelievable as everything else that had happened in this trying day. She finally closed the door and turned to prepare for the evening ahead. She didn't look forward to spending it alone with the arrogant Asmodeus in his ugly state of mind. But she hadn't much choice.

She kept thinking about her dream. And this led her to wonder about the cellars of the big mansion. She had never been down below though she'd been told that was where the millionaire had his paintings stored. Was there also another dark chamber down there similar to the one in her nightmare? Was that where the white-haired man and his friends gathered to indulge in their black magic practices? It seemed too utterly preposterous. But then so had many other things that had since happened.

A half-hour later she joined Mr. Asmodeus in the living room. She had put on a crimson gown and he had changed to a dinner jacket. He seemed

his normal urbane self. Pouring her a martini, he passed it to her with a smile.

She took it with a shadow of reluctance. "After seeing Helen as she is, I'm doubtful if I should continue drinking," she said.

He had prepared a drink for himself. He shrugged. "Helen is a foolish young woman. I'm sure you possess a great deal more self-control than she has ever had."

"I hope you weren't too hard on her," she said.

He studied his glass. "I sent her to her room. She'll be all right in the morning."

"Does she know about the accident?" she asked him.

He frowned. "No. And please don't mention it to her. In fact, I don't want you to mention it to anyone."

"Very well," she said. "I suppose it might be unsettling for her."

Mr. Asmodeus looked grim. "She is in no condition to accept confidences or extend any. And that reminds me, what did she have to say to you?"

Marie was wary. "Not much of anything. She was very mixed up."

"She must have told you something."

"She mostly complained about herself. That she'd lost her beauty. I told her she was wrong."

"Not that she hasn't tried hard enough to destroy herself," Mr. Asmodeus said darkly. "Well, we mustn't ruin the evening by concentrating on her." And he sipped his drink.

"Have you been in touch with Sonny?"

"I tried his apartment but he wasn't there."

"He'll be in a panic, not knowing what happened—how badly hurt the man was."

"It will do him good to sweat over it a little," was the white-haired man's opinion. "I'll call him again later. He probably hadn't time to get there. As I assume he will drive somewhat more slowly on the way in."

"I'd think so," she agreed. "Though he was in a weird rebellious mood."

They finished their drinks and went in to dinner. It was strange to sit in the candle-lit dining room with the millionaire and have no one else for conversation. The dinner was served in near silence and she had the feeling that Asmodeus had fallen into a depressed mood.

It was dark when they finished the excellent meal and he led her out by the pool for a stroll. They could see and hear the ocean. The sound of the pounding waves gave her a lonesome feeling.

Turning to him she said, "You don't boat anymore?"

The hawk-faced man stared at the distant water. "No. I've given it up."

"I understand you were almost drowned once," she said.

His eyes were still on the ocean. "Who told you that?"

"I don't remember," she said. "Perhaps you did."

"All night," he murmured, a tense expression on the swarthy face. "The waves were like mountains."

"You sound as if you hated the sea," she said. "If that is so, why do you still live here?"

He turned his burning eyes from the ocean to gaze at her. "There is no place else for me. I shall never leave this house."

"Why stay if the nearness of the ocean bothers you?"

"You wouldn't understand," he said.

"Did that experience make a lot of difference in your life?" she asked. "I mean coming so close to death and then returning."

"I think part of me is still out there," he said, indicating the ocean. And his words struck an eerie chill in her. She again recalled the dream Jean Martin had told her about and her eyes drifted to his shoulders. She almost expected to see the dripping, wet seaweed but of course it wasn't visible.

Standing beside him in the darkness she hazarded, "You mean you didn't come back quite the same that the experience scarred you."

"Have you any idea how lonely the ocean can be?" he asked.

"The sound of it makes me feel alone now."

"When you are out there," he said, staring towards the dark horizon again, "you know its vastness."

"Well, the story had a happy ending. You survived the ordeal," she said.

He sighed. "It is very different without Sonny being here."

She was aware that he had quickly changed the subject and guessed it was he felt too strongly about the ocean to talk about it any longer. His night of terror out there must have been a deciding point in his life. If what Hugh had learned was true he'd not been the same since.

She said, "I've been reading about Von Klare."

"Good. I expected that you would familiarize yourself with his history," he said. "We've made enough money from his work."

Marie smiled faintly. "I can't deny that."

"I'm positive the balance of the paintings will move."

"We already have orders for two-thirds of them."

"Excellent," Mr. Asmodeus said.

"I knew that Von Klare had been a suicide," she went on.

"I believe Lucius Barr mentioned that in his article."

"He did. But I was surprised to discover he'd left out some other important and interesting facts. I didn't realize this until I delved into the life of Von Klare."

"No article of that sort is ever complete."

"But shouldn't he have made some reference to the fact Von Klare was a Satanist," she said. "Especially since Lucius Barr is interested in the occult himself."

The white-haired man eyed her with interest. "You found all that out."

"Yes."

"Does the fact he was a Satanist make you think any less of Von Klare and his work?"

She hesitated. "No. I don't suppose so. It explains why he used those tiny monster figures in all his canvases."

"The bestiary," Mr. Asmodeus said with a grim smile. "Von Klare carried out his beliefs in all his work. He was truly devoted to Satan."

"Yet he couldn't have been a happy man, since in the end he killed himself," she suggested.

"I believe history tells us he was hounded to his death by stupid officials," Mr. Asmodeus said with bitterness.

"Was Cheng inspired by the artists of the middle ages in his work?" she asked. She had it on the tip of her tongue to question him as to whether Cheng had really been the artist responsible for those strange paintings but felt it wiser to approach the subject more delicately.

The millionaire smiled at her in the semi-darkness. "I have a slight confession to make. You are close enough to me now to understand. The paintings Cheng brought to you at the gallery were not his. They were done many years ago by another artist."

So the truth had finally come out! She said, "I've wondered about that from the start."

"Now you know. It suited me to pretend they

were Cheng's paintings. But it is time for me to be completely frank with you. For a number of years I have dabbled in the mystical. I am the leader of a black magic circle. We have a good membership and a loyal one. Those paintings in your window were my mark of approval. And most of the paintings you have sold since were bought by my members."

She listened and knew that it all fitted in. She had even suspected part of these facts. Now she knew the full truth. Or at least as much as he was willing to admit to her. She recalled the grim nightmare she'd had during her afternoon nap and wondered if his black magic circle were as harmless as he attempted to make it sound.

"That explains why the gallery suddenly became so popular;" she said.

"You deserved the support," he was quick to say. "And I was happy to have found you. Tomorrow night you'll meet most of our little group. And who knows? You might decide to become one of us." The burning eyes were fixed on her as he almost too casually offered this suggestion.

She was at once uneasy. "I doubt it," she said. "I have never been attracted to the occult."

"You may have been missing a great experience," he said, still studying her.

"Perhaps. But I doubt if it is for me. Some people are drawn to the supernatural. I have always been indifferent on the subject."

"Because you have never been properly

introduced to that other realm," the millionaire said in his hypnotic fashion. "I would consider it a privilege to initiate you in our rites."

"I'll think about it," she said, in an effort to have him drop the subject. But she was becoming increasingly alarmed. Most of the things Hugh had discussed with her were proving to be true. Asmodeus was the leader of a secret cult and they did meet at this isolated house. And now he was almost insisting she become part of the group.

"It's quite possible my members will continue to support your gallery whether you decide to join us or not," Mr. Asmodeus said. "But they would be bound to be more solidly with you if they felt you were one of them."

"I understand," she said, quietly. And in her mind she resolved to make her wishes known about selling her share of the gallery as soon as she returned to the city. Let Asmodeus have it all. She'd be content with her painting and Hugh.

In a move that was surprising and almost repulsive to her the white-haired man came close and placed an arm around her. In an earnest tone, he said, "I also have personal reasons for wanting you to consider membership in our ranks. I'm a very lonely man. Helen has disappointed me badly. I'm going to have to eliminate her from my life. I need someone I can trust to replace her. You could be that person. And perhaps one day you'd consider being my wife."

Marie was unable to conceal her shock at this unexpected overture on the older man's part. In a small voice she said, "I've never considered you as anything more than a very good friend."

"I appreciate that," he said with understanding. "But the time comes when all relationships must change. I think that moment has come with us. I don't expect you to rush forward with the idea. But I want you to think about it."

"You encouraged me to fall in love with Sonny," she reminded him.

The white-haired man showed distaste at her mention of the singer's name. "You've had a sample of the kind of trouble he can get you in. It's only good luck that he isn't in jail on a manslaughter charge this moment."

"I know," she admitted with a sigh.

"He is a drug addict and his future is dark," Mr. Asmodeus went on. "I can't continue to approve of him for you. That is one reason I feel free to talk to you on my own behalf now."

She looked into those burning eyes. "There is Hugh," she said.

The millionaire looked startled. "I thought you were finished with him."

"We did break up. But I'm still fond of him."

"I can give you much more," Mr. Asmodeus told her. "I may be older but I can leave you a rich widow. And while I'm with you I can offer you anything that wealth will buy."

"I realize that," she said slowly, "and I'm flattered that you think enough of me to talk this way."

Mr. Asmodeus smiled. "There is no need for you to be grateful. Let us dismiss the subject for the time being. Tomorrow night you will meet some of my friends and learn something of my hobby. And you will have plenty of time to decide what you wish to do."

"Thank you," she said.

They strolled in the garden for a little and then returned to the living room. Here he showed her a sampling of his rich collection of books on medieval magic. She had never seen him more animated. A kind of radiant happiness emanated from him as he took down one richly bound volume after another and offered it to her for her consideration.

She was impressed by the bookshelves he devoted to these manuals alone. They filled a corner of the living room from floor to ceiling. Though some of the books were shabbier than others he assured her they formed part of a priceless collection. Even though she considered witchcraft and black magic weird and outside her range of interest she could understand that people could be caught up in the study of these things just as they might in other hobbies.

"This is *The Key to Solomon* one of the most comprehensive of the manuals," he said showing it to her.

She studied its ancient script and then looked up to ask him, "Have you read all of these?"

"I know most of them word for word," he assured her solemnly. "I can recite entire passages of the important books."

"Do your followers become as well versed in the subject?"

He shook his head. "Rarely. But I have learned the practice as well as the theory of mystical power. I can summon demons and dismiss them at will. The knowledge and abilities I possess extend far beyond those of your average spiritualist."

Marie was again filled with uneasiness. She stared up into those burning eyes. "You really claim to have power to make things happen?"

"It is possible," he said carefully.

She studied him with awe. If that should be true he might hold the power of life or death. It could have been a simple matter for him earlier in the day to summon Demonic assistance and modify the injuries of the old man Sonny had run down with the car, which would explain the miracle of his being only badly bruised rather than dead!

She suddenly realized she was beginning to accept the values of his dark beliefs and felt guilty. But as he presented these ancient volumes the evidence seemed strong that there was more than mere superstition to the cult he represented.

She took another book from him which was bound in rich brown vellum with its title in gold lettering. She read the title *True Grimoire*. Smiling

at him, she said, "Is this one of the good books on the subject?"

He nodded and with great earnestness leaned over to open the book to a certain page. "I'd like you to take this to bed with you," he said. "I want you to read that passage just before you go to sleep."

She hesitated. "Is there a special reason for doing it?"

"Only to make you more aware of the subject," he said. "It will help you in conversation with my friends tomorrow night."

"Very well," she said, rising. "I'll give it some time." She said goodnight to him and went to her room. It had been a strange evening filled with unexpected events. Coming after her strenuous day it had left her utterly exhausted.

She prepared for bed filled with thoughts about Asmodeus and the strange house in which she was a guest. It was her fear that following the dreadful night on the ocean when Asmodeus had nearly lost his life he had turned more to his black magic. What had been merely a hobby for him before had now become an obsession. Perhaps to the point of madness!

His changed attitude towards his business suggested this. And his notions that he had the power to give or take life. They could have come to him because of his miraculous escape from drowning. He might have credited his pact with Satan as hav-

ing saved him. The possibilities of all this were frightening. And when this weekend was over she meant to break her association with him completely.

If she didn't she was very apt to end the same kind of wreckage as the once lovely Helen Beacon. Helen had tried to warn her about something earlier in the evening. But Asmodeus had interrupted her. Marie had an idea the dark-haired beauty knew that Asmodeus was about to abandon her and she wanted to warn her against taking her place. If the opportunity presented itself she would talk to the model during the following day.

When she got into bed she began to read the passage Asmodeus had suggested. It began: "O Emperor Lucifer, Chief of all the spirits which rebelled, I beg thee to favour me in this conjuration. O Prince Beelzebub, I adjure thee to protect me in this work. May you allow me, in return for the part which I will sign, the wealth which I am in need of."

Marie stopped reading with a frown on her attractive face. He had asked her to read what was essentially a pact with Satan. She closed the ancient book with a feeling of disgust. She wanted none of it. She put the book on the bedside table, turned out the lamp and lay down to sleep.

In the stillness of the night the wash of the waves were more apparent. She tried to relax but had little luck. Her mind was filled with dozens of

upsetting pictures. The accident still haunted her. And she wondered about Sonny. Asmodeus had become so caught up in his explanation of witchcraft to her he'd not even tried to get in touch with the singer later in the evening. Sonny would still think he'd killed or seriously injured the old man.

This atmosphere of black magic cloaked the big mansion. Asmodeus was steeped in it, and his silent, thin-lipped servants suggested they might also be converts to his weird cult. She was troubled by the prospect of meeting those other members of the secret society the following evening and tried to think of some way she could escape the mansion. But it would be difficult without letting Asmodeus clearly know she was finished with him. And if he were insane such a step might be dangerous.

Sleep came to her uneasy mind. And it was to be expected that her dreams were haunted by monsters and scorpions. Several times the swarthy, lined face of the white-haired Asmodeus gazed at her with irony in her nightmares. And when she awoke to a gray dawn she felt wan and weary rather than rested.

Asmodeus was at the breakfast table to greet her. "I fear we will not be enjoying the company of Helen this weekend," he informed her with a certain mocking note in his voice. "She felt so indisposed she begged me to have my car take her back to the city. She left an hour ago."

Marie was startled and disappointed. She'd

hoped to have a private talk with the model. Now there would be no chance of this. As Asmodeus seated her at the table, she said, "I should have returned to the city myself. The weekend was ruined for me by the accident."

"I can understand that," the white-haired man said, sitting across from her. "So you must just rest quietly. Perhaps do some reading from a few more of my books of the occult." He gave her a meaningful smile.

For several reasons his smile frightened her. There was more than a hint of the sinister in it. "I will rest," she said. Careful not to agree to read any of the type of books he'd given her the previous night.

"And my friends will be arriving in the early evening," he reminded her. "You'll recognize many of your gallery customers among them."

"Yes," she said in a low voice. This prospect did not cheer her.

A silent maid came and served them breakfast. Over her toast Marie asked, "Have you been in touch with Sonny?"

Asmodeus looked grim. "Yes. I've spoken to him."

"Is he all right?"

"As well as you'd expect. He had a bad scare."

"Was he relieved to hear the old man wasn't badly hurt?" she asked.

"Naturally," Asmodeus said. "I doubt if he'll

learn anything from the experience. He's too far gone."

"Is there nothing you can do?" she asked plaintively.

"Little I can think of at the moment," was his almost curt reply.

She silently continued with her breakfast. She thought she knew why Asmodeus was so willing to condemn Sonny. Now that he had decided on her to take Helen's place he saw Sonny in the light of a rival for her affections. Regardless of the financial interest he had in the singer this made him willing to see him destroyed. It was a grim revelation of the type of person the millionaire was.

"The weather is clearing," Asmodeus said. "It should be a pleasant day by the pool."

"Where do you have your meeting?" she asked.

"In a special room at one end of the cellars," he told her. "I will be busy part of the day making certain preparations for it."

"This is not near the vault where you have your art collection, then?"

"No," he said. "That room is almost directly beneath us. You will see it soon."

She looked across the table at him. "I would like to go down there one day. I have a hunger to see some of Jean Martin's paintings again. She's been very much on my mind lately."

"Indeed?" he raised his eyebrows. "Did you regard her as all that gifted?"

"Didn't you?" she asked with surprise. "You

bought all her paintings. Actually cornered the market on them."

"I know," he said with a cold smile. "But in retrospect I may have been mistaken. I'm not sure I approved of her subject matter. Her religiosity was somewhat boring."

"I'm sorry you've changed your mind," she said.

He shrugged. "It makes no difference. The money I spent on the paintings meant nothing to me."

"But it would make a difference to Jean," she persisted. "She'd prefer having the paintings in the hands of someone who appreciated them."

Asmodeus gave her a meaningful look. "Under certain circumstances they might be in your hands shortly. And we must be grateful to them for bringing us together."

There was grim irony in his words. She was already regretting the night they'd met. But she did not dare give him any idea of what she was thinking. If she could somehow survive this day and night and get safely back to New York she would at once inform him of her plans.

After breakfast the millionaire left her and she went out to enjoy the sunshine and air by the pool on her own. She toyed with the idea of calling Hugh and asking him to rent a car and come out for her but she hesitated to bring him to the attention of the millionaire again. There was no telling what the jealous and apparently demented Asmo-

deus might attempt as retribution against him. She did not want harm to come to Hugh. And she had almost come to the point where she believed in the eccentric millionaire's ability to work spells.

She also worried about Helen Beacon. Something told her the dark girl hadn't returned to the city, that instead she might be somewhere in the big mansion a prisoner. And when she went into the house to change from her bathing suit to a luncheon dress she asked the housekeeper which room was the model's. The housekeeper showed her and she went to the door and tried it. The door was locked and there was no answer.

Asmodeus spent most of the afternoon with her. They walked along the beach and he talked to her about his experiences as a cult leader. "These people have great confidence in me," he assured her.

"You give more of your time to this now than you used to," she said, in an effort to pry some information from him.

"Yes, I do," he said. "I believe this is a critical period for me."

"Why do you say that?"

He offered her one of his mocking smiles. "I don't think I could properly explain that to you."

By dinner time he was in a really expansive mood. She had never known him to be in such a pleasant humor. She had not yet seen the cellar room where the meeting of the black magic cult would be held. She decided that he was going to

wait and show her down there after the other members got there.

They finished dinner about eight and by dusk the cultists began to arrive. Soon cars filled the parking space in front of the house and overflowed into the road. Asmodeus served cocktails for them in the living room and the servants moved about busily through the crowded area.

It was astounding how many of the faces she recognized. All the weird, grim individuals who had come to the gallery as customers were there. The room was loud with their shrill voices and thick with their cigarette smoke. Most of them were drinking heavily. This was apparent from their flushed faces and flamboyant behavior.

Asmodeus moved among them as the considerate host. They all showed him an awesome deference. Marie studied the jaded, painted faces of elderly women, the dissipated, sallow looks of the males, young and old, and the tense, too bright-eyed young women and decided they were all a sickly, neurotic lot.

"It is time for us to assemble," Asmodeus announced. There was a low murmuring of eager anticipation in the room. He turned to her with a smile and took her by the arm. "You are to be our guest of honor," he told her. "We will lead the way."

She was trembling as he led her down the shadowed hall to the dark stairway. Then they walked along a long underground passage followed by the

host of others. Soon the glow of a candle showed ahead and they were at the entrance of the Satanist temple. She gave a tiny gasp. The room in which the rites were to be held matched almost exactly in detail the room of her nightmare!

CHAPTER TWELVE

The small shadowed cellar room was quickly filled by the followers of Mr. Asmodeus. He smiled at her and left her to mount the altar. She was conscious of someone coming to stand close by her. And when she turned to see who it was she discovered the blank-faced Cheng had moved beside her. She could only assume he was following the instructions of the millionaire in keeping a watch on her.

Asmodeus had donned black robes and now he began a strange chant that was taken up by the others. A kind of weird sweet incense filled the room and made Marie's head sway. She was terrified that the incense might be some kind of drug

which would render her helpless at the hands of these Devil worshipers.

A glance around her showed the rapt expression on the bizarre collection of faces as they gave their full attention to the black-robed millionaire. He was going over some incantation in which the name of Lucifer played a prominent part. She heard it repeated several times. And as she watched she saw him take a knife from the rostrum and signal to someone to the right of him. On the signal this helper appeared with a squirming fowl of some sort and gave it to him. She watched with horrified eyes as Asmodeus plunged the knife blade into the throat of the bird and saw the blood spurt from it.

Now Asmodeus held the dying thing high above his head as it continued to bleed and squawk. At the same time he began to chant in that strange tongue again. Marie felt she was going to be ill. She looked at Cheng from the corner of her eye and saw that he was caught up in the ritual. Taking advantage of this she darted away from him quickly and rudely pushed herself a path through the others. Her progress was marked by angry looks and murmurs of annoyance from the Satanists she disturbed but within a short time she had escaped from the hot, incense-filled cellar. She ran back along the dark passage to the stairs. And a few minutes later she was in the safety of her room with her door locked.

She had found both the ritual and the people at-

tending it revolting. And Mr. Asmodeus had clearly shown himself as either an ardent Satanist without a conscience or a madman. It mattered little to her which he was. All she waited for now was a safe return to the city in the morning. She paced restlessly up and down in her room fearing that the millionaire might send someone for her or even come himself to try and get her to return to the eerie ceremony.

But no one came. And a little after ten she heard the sound of voices in the main section of the house. After that cars started outside and drove away. When all this activity was over there were footsteps in the hall followed by an easy rapping on her door.

"Yes," she said, going over to it.

"It's only me," came the familiar voice of the millionaire. "I missed you at the ritual. What happened?"

"My head began to ache wickedly. It was the incense, I'm sure," she said. At least it was a kind of excuse.

"That's too bad," Asmodeus said from the other side of the door. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No thank you," she said. "I'll be all right in the morning. What time will you be leaving for the city? I have appointments at the gallery for shortly after nine." This was not true but he wouldn't know it and she wanted to get away as early as possible.

"Then we should leave at eight," the millionaire said. "I'll see that breakfast is ready for us at seven."

"Thank you," she said.

There was a pause from the other side of the door. Then Asmodeus said, "If there's nothing else I can do I'll say goodnight."

"Goodnight," she told him. She knew he was disappointed about her not being enthusiastic over the black mass. She had no intention of pretending that she had been impressed by it.

She heard his footsteps retreating and decided it would be safe to prepare for bed. Until she was free from the sinister mansion in the morning she would have to play a desperate game. Pretend she was still in accord with the eccentric Asmodeus. But once she returned to the city she would let him know her true feelings.

When she got in bed she was afraid to turn out the light and she spent the long hours in a miserable, broken sleep. Dawn came at six and she got up promptly knowing she could sleep no more. She dressed and packed her bags and then went out for a stroll around the pool before going back in for breakfast.

It was going to be a fine day. But it was still bleak and cool as night reluctantly shed its mantle to the rosy dawn. She was standing by the pool when a gnarled, veteran came by in the outfit of a workman or gardener. He wore a cloth cap which he tipped politely as he drew near her.

"Going to be a fine day," he said in an ancient wheezing voice.

"I'm glad to hear that," she smiled. "Do you take care of the grounds?"

"Do most of it," the oldster agreed. "Like to get an early start."

"This is early enough."

"May be for city folks. Not for me. I don't sleep good anymore." He gave her a sharp glance from his sunken blue eyes. "You a guest of the boss?"

"Yes."

"You don't look much like the other loonies that come here," he said with digust on his weathered old face.

"Thank you," she smiled.

"Wish the boss would come back to his old self," the veteran mourned. "He's never been the same since he was caught out in that boat all night. All of us here thought he had drowned for sure. But he hadn't. The boat capsized and he still managed to save himself. He came back here the next morning cool as a cucumber and said he'd swam the last part of the way ashore."

"It must have been a terrifying experience for him."

The old man nodded grimly. "I expect so. I can tell you he's been like a different person since. A lot of things he doesn't seem to remember at all. And he keeps to himself a lot."

She stared at the veteran. "You've noticed that much change in him?"

"Yes," he said emphatically. "He always held those meetings with that loony crowd but lately he's had them more often. Some of the help thought he was crazy and they left. But most of us have stayed on."

"It's a strange situation," she said.

"Everything's crazy these days," the old man said with disgust. "I guess maybe you heard about old Ben back up the road being hit by some car that didn't even stop."

"I believe Mr. Asmodeus mentioned it," she said nervously. "It happened on Saturday afternoon, didn't it?"

"Yep," the oldster said. "At the start it looked like old Ben wasn't hurt bad and then yesterday he took a quick turn for the worse and died within a half hour."

"Oh, no!' Marie exclaimed.

The old man stared at her curiously. "You knew old Ben?"

She at once fought to control her emotions. "No. But I've heard about him. It's too bad."

"Whoever that driver was must be feeling guilty," the old man observed. Then he glanced behind her uneasily and tipped his cap and went on his way.

She was in a fog of shock. She looked to see what had made the gardener move on so quickly and saw that Mr. Asmodeus was approaching her. He was dressed in a dark business suit for the drive to the city.

Coming up to her with a calm expression, he said, "I thought I should tell you breakfast is ready."

Her eyes met those burning ones of his. "Before we go inside there's something we should discuss," she said.

He frowned slightly. "What is it?"

"Why didn't you tell me that old man had died?"

Asmodeus was silent for a moment, a somewhat derisive look crossed his swarthy face. "I didn't want to upset you."

"That's a poor excuse," she said. "I say you kept silent so I wouldn't report the facts of the accident to the police. Tell them it was Sonny Bartlett at the wheel of the car."

"Wouldn't they think you were a little slow in coming forward," he said in a jeering tone.

"I don't care what they think or how much they blame me," she said in anger. "I'm going to tell them the truth."

"I think not," he said evenly.

"You can't stop me," she told him.

"I wouldn't try to," he said. "But there would be no point in your going to the authorities now."

"You lied to me about that before," she accused him.

"I have the early edition of the morning paper here," the millionaire said. And she noticed for the first time that he was holding a folded paper in one hand. "It comes with the milk around five. I think

you should take a look at the headlines." And he unfolded it and passed it to her.

The first thing she saw was a smiling photograph of the pop singer. And then she read the headlines, "Sonny Bartlett found dead in his apartment from overdose of heroin!" She looked up from the paper with a gasp. "Sonny dead!"

He nodded. "So it would seem justice has been served. He probably killed himself deliberately when he heard the old man had died."

She was shaken so badly she couldn't think. "That's awful!" she said numbly.

"Be pleased. It solves your problem. Come have some breakfast."

"I can't," she protested. "I'd be ill."

"At least come in and have some coffee," he said. "Then we'll begin the drive in to the city."

Because she desperately wanted to begin that drive she forced herself to go inside with him. She managed to drink a single cup of coffee. By then it was time for the road. They said little to each other as they were whisked into New York in the chauffeur-driven car. Marie sat with closed eyes much of the way. The several times she opened them she saw Mr. Asmodeus sitting there with a rather blank expression on his face. The death of Sonny Bartlett bothered him so little she was sure he had in some way arranged it.

He had the car stop in front of the gallery. "I'll call by and see you this evening," he promised. "We have a lot of things to discuss."

She wasn't averse to the meeting since she wanted the chance to tell him she was ready to dissociate herself from all his activities. She said, "What time will you come?"

"I don't know yet," he said. "I'll phone you this afternoon."

"Very well," she said. And she left him to go open the gallery.

She was still half-nauseated from shock. The first thing she did when she entered the gallery was find a hidden bottle of vodka and pour herself a stiff drink. She knew she was becoming too dependent on alcohol and Asmodeus had encouraged it. But this morning she needed something to help her face up to things.

After the vodka she put a phone call through to Hugh. When he came on the line he sounded extremely upset. "When I read about Sonny I nearly went out to Long Island," her fiancé said.

"His suicide is only part of it," she said frantically. "It was like a madhouse out there. I'll tell you when I see you."

"I'll come by at noon," he promised. "What about Asmodeus?"

"I have an idea he'll be busy looking after Sonny Bartlett's affairs and funeral arrangements," she said. "He's coming back to see me this evening."

"We need to talk about that," her fiance said grimly.

"I know," she agreed.

She put down the phone and tried to busy herself with the affairs of the gallery. At ten o'clock Cheng arrived. The thin Chinese went quietly about his work and made no reference to seeing her at the shore mansion the previous night. So she said nothing to him about the Satanist meeting.

He went to lunch about twelve-thirty and she felt this would give her at least a half-hour alone with Hugh. She had so many things to tell her fiance she didn't know whether that would give her time. But she hoped it would.

Cheng was working at the rear of the gallery placing a painting in a wooden box to be shipped to California. She had just finished with a customer who had purchased one of the last of the Von Klare paintings. She was going to make a notation of the sale in her day book when she glanced out the glass door and saw a familiar figure standing on the opposite side of Madison Avenue waiting for the traffic to stop to come across to the store. It was the lovely Helen Beacon. The dark girl looked wan and haggard and seemed to be glancing over her shoulder nervously.

Marie felt a throb of excitement run through her as she kept her eyes on the model. And then another familiar face showed out of the crowd. It was Asmodeus and he was striding angrily towards Helen. Even a long distance from them both Marie had the impulsive desire to cry out a warning to the model. But it wasn't necessary, the

frightened Helen saw her pursuer and at once stepped out from the curb and began running across the street. She didn't get half-way across before a giant truck bore down on her. Helen saw it and screamed as Marie cried out in unison from inside the gallery. And then the lovely model was crushed beneath the truck's wheels!

There was the shrill scream of brakes, loud shouts from the sidewalk, the blaring of horns! Traffic had come to a halt as a result of the accident. Marie ran out onto the sidewalk and tried to reach the unfortunate Helen. But a ring had already gathered around the accident scene to hold her back. She watched as police arrived and tried to get closer.

"Is she dead?" she asked a man close to her.

"Has to be," was his grim reply.

She looked over at the other side of the street and saw Asmodeus standing there amid the watching crowd. There was a sneering look of satisfaction on his swarthy face. She was about to call out his name and shout murderer when he quickly vanished. Now the ambulance siren came screaming and she turned weakly and made her way into the gallery.

Cheng was standing there gazing out into the street. She told him, "A girl was killed. Someone you must have known! Helen Beacon!"

He betrayed no expression in those staring eyes behind the thick glasses. "Is too bad," he said. But there was no emotion in his words.

Marie tried to find out what hospital the girl had been taken to without any results. Then it was time for Cheng to leave for lunch. And at last she was blessedly alone and waiting for Hugh. In the few minutes available she tried another hospital to learn that Helen had been taken there and had been dead on arrival.

She'd hardly put down the phone when Hugh came into the gallery. She ran to his arms, and sobbed, "There was a terrible accident outside here. A truck ran down Helen Beacon and killed her."

Hugh's arms were around her. "Steady," he said. "I've got an accident of my own to report. The elevator I came down from my office in just now fell the last two floors. A couple of people were injured quite badly and I twisted an ankle."

She stared at him with wide eyes and gasped, "Asmodeus! He's responsible!"

"How?" Hugh demanded incredulously.

"It's part of his Satanism," she exclaimed. "He told me out at the shore house that he has the power over life and death. That he can create spells to send people to destruction. He did it to Sonny and Helen! And now he's trying to kill you!"

"Why should he care what happens to me?" Hugh asked.

"He cares all right," she said bitterly. "He knows we are engaged and he wants to marry me!"

Hugh looked thunderstruck. "This is a new development. Fill me in on what happened during the weekend."

And she did as quickly as she could. Fearful that Cheng would return before she finished. When she finally came to the end of her account, she said, "He's either gone mad with his Satanism or he's the most evil man that ever lived!"

Hugh gave her a strange look. "Suppose he could be Satan himself?"

Her eyes widened. "Satan?"

"Why not?" Hugh asked and then went on to explain in a hurry, "Everyone seems to agree Asmodeus should have died in the storm that night. And still he turned up the next morning apparently unhurt but changed. This strangeness about him has been noticed by almost everyone. Yet no one has hit upon the possibility that Asmodeus did die in the storm and the Satan he worshiped took the opportunity of assuming his body."

Marie listened with growing horror. "Do you really believe that possible?"

"Satan roaming the streets of New York in a business suit?" Hugh said. "Why not? The thought that it could happen has occurred to me many times."

"The King of Evil!"

"And he has chosen you to be his bride," Hugh said grimly.

"What will I do?" she implored Hugh to tell her.

"It would be nice if we could call on the police," Hugh said with a bleak look. "But we can't very well tell them we think we have a direct line on Satan."

"There's not even anything we can accuse him of," she pointed out.

"He's a wily gentleman," Hugh admitted. "You say he's coming to the gallery after hours tonight?"

"Yes."

"As soon as he lets you know definitely when you get in touch with me," Hugh said. "I'll have to be here."

"What are you going to do?"

He shrugged. "I haven't decided yet. Maybe find myself a witch or warlock and ask their advice. They tell me there are places in Harlem where black magic is still a commodity."

"I'm afraid of that Cheng," she said, her eyes bright with terror. "And he'll be back soon. I don't know whether I can stay on here the afternoon or not."

"You must," Hugh said. "Asmodeus will be phoning and you don't want to miss his message. As soon as you get it let me know. If I'm not at the office leave a message for me."

She promised she would and he kissed her and left. It wasn't more than two or three minutes before the silent Cheng returned and her ordeal for the afternoon began. A few customers came and went. And then around four Asmodeus called. He

made no reference to Helen Beacon's accidental death for which Marie felt him directly responsible. Apparently he was not aware Marie had seen him at the accident scene.

"I'm very busy," he informed her. "It will be close to ten before I get to the gallery. But I'll be there. We must have a long talk about the future."

"Very well," she said in a small voice.

She had to wait until Cheng left at five before she could call Hugh. By that time he had left the office. But he'd asked the switchboard girl to give her a message. The message was that he'd be at the gallery around eight o'clock.

Marie felt too jittery to go back to the apartment for dinner. Instead she went to a restaurant around the corner and ordered a pot of coffee and a cheese sandwich. She left the sandwich untouched while she lingered over the coffee. When it was close to eight o'clock she returned to the gallery.

It was raining hard and a strong wind had come up to make it a thoroughly unpleasant evening. So the usually busy area of Madison Avenue was barren of pedestrians and only a few cars drove by. She snapped on the lights in the rear of the shadowed gallery and took off her coat and kerchief. They were both drenched. She hung them up to dry and was on her way out to the gallery when she saw Hugh's face framed in the glass window of the entrance door.

She rushed over to let him in. "I'm really glad to see you."

He took her by the arms and studied her. "You look sick! You're ashen!"

"I'm terrified," she admitted.

His youthful face was stern. "You don't have to be. I'm going to be hidden in the rear of the gallery when your visitor comes. And I've made good use of my time. I talked with some of the right people in Harlem. And we're going to have a little surprise for Mr. Asmodeus."

"What sort of surprise?"

"The incantation of King Solomon, guaranteed to banish Satan," Hugh said, reaching inside his jacket and producing a folded sheet of paper from an inner pocket.

She stared at him disdainfully. "You don't believe in such things!"

"Maybe not," he said. "But Asmodeus does. That's the important point. He's already told you of the power of his own spells. Whether he's truly Satan or a madman obsessed by Satanism he'll know this incantation and fear it. You'll have to memorize it before he arrives and be ready to hurl it at him."

Still dubious she took the paper from him and read the four words in a strange tongue inscribed there. She looked up at her fiance. "Is this worth trying?"

"I spent nearly the whole afternoon getting the

information," Hugh told her soberly. "I think it is the only thing that will help."

The storm outside grew worse. Rain drifted in sheets along the shining asphalt of the avenue. It was nine-forty-five and Hugh had taken his stand in the darkness of the rear room. At his instructions she had turned on only one of the gallery's main lights. And so she stood there anxiously waiting in the shadowed room with its ghostly array of paintings. Thinking of many things. Of her dead friend, Jean Martin. Of Sonny and Helen who had also been victims of the evil man she expected at any moment.

The wind howled and the rain lashed against the windows of the gallery and then the door opened and he came in out of the storm, just as he had on that first night. The night he'd won her over to him.

She spoke in an awed whisper, "I didn't unlock the door for you!"

He smiled coldly. "You didn't need to. I have ways of entering where I want to."

"And getting what you want as well," she said grimly.

Asmodeus nodded. "That is true. Now I have come to make my final claim on you." He was an imposing figure in his black cape and Homburg.

Marie took a step backward and then she cried out, "Go! Lofaham, Solomon, Iyouel, Iyousenaoui!" Her voice rose to a shrill scream as she finished the incantation.

The swarthy face of the man in the rain cape contorted with a kind of fear and anguish. Something like a groan escaped his lips. He clenched his fists and raising them above his head came staggering forward as if to pummel her with them. She turned and fled to the rear of the gallery where Hugh was hiding. She screamed her fear as Hugh sprang out from the shadows to her aid.

By the time he reached the gallery there was no sign of Mr. Asmodeus. The gallery was empty and only the whining wind and lash of rain interrupted the silence. Hugh turned and went across to a sobbing Marie.

He took her in his arms. "I didn't tell you before," he said. "But Asmodeus is one of the names given the Devil by the ancients."

It was several days before the police came to the gallery to talk to Marie. Her name had been given to them by one of the servants at the shore house. The detective was a youthful one in plain clothes and he looked ill at ease about his assignment.

"I won't take much of your time, Miss Holt," he apologized, his notebook in hand. "I understand you were several times a guest of Mr. Asmodeus."

"Yes," she said. "I knew him. He had an interest in my gallery."

The detective nodded. "He had many business interests," he said. "I suppose you know he vanished some nights ago."

"I hadn't heard," she said vaguely, though she

vividly recalled that fear-contorted face as she'd invoked the incantation against Satan.

"Yes," the young man said. "His household servants were worried and called in the police. They finally decided he must have somehow fallen from his wharf and drowned."

"Oh?" She was listening tensely.

"A search was made of the water near his place and a body was found."

She gave a deep sigh. "Then he was drowned."

"So it would seem," the Detective admitted. "But there are some odd aspects to the case."

"Really?"

"Yes. The body that was found was in a decomposed state to suggest that it had been in the water for a long period and not a matter of a few days."

Her eyebrows raised. "Perhaps it wasn't his body."

"We think it was," the Detective said. "There were a few identifying items such as cuff-links and a tie pin. But we can't explain why the body should indicate the deterioration of months in the ocean."

"There must be some answer."

"Yes," he agreed. "But I think it is beyond us. It seems unlikely anyone else should have been wearing identical cuff-links and tie pin."

"I suppose it is unlikely," she agreed.

The young detective put away his notebook. "So it would appear that it was the body of Asmodeus we found. The state of his body might be ex-

plained by some undetermined chemical content in the water of the area. Pollution is very widespread these days and we're always discovering new instances of it. This could be one."

"Perhaps," she said.

"There's nothing you can add to help us?" the detective asked.

"Nothing, I'm afraid," she said.

"There are a great many paintings stored in one of the cellars out there," the young man said as he started for the door. "No doubt the lawyers for the estate will be contacting you about them."

"Perhaps," she said.

"They're in rather a puzzled state as well," the detective said. "Asmodeus hadn't been in touch with them for a long while. From what I hear he'd been in a strange frame of mind for many months."

"I've also heard that," she said.

He nodded. "If you think of anything let me know." And he went out.

Marie stood in the doorway of the gallery watching him vanish in the crowded street. So that was to be the end of it. Had Hugh been right in his theory that Asmodeus had been drowned months before and Satan took his place? According to what the detective had just told her, he could be. The body they found had shown the decomposition of months in the ocean! Baffling to them but not to her.

Cheng had not returned since the night she'd

hurled the incantation at Asmodeus. She'd taken the monster pictures from the window and stored them in the rear of the shop. They had been replaced by modern paintings in the abstract mood. The window now had a bright, cheerful air and her customers had changed. None of the freaky, weird ones showed themselves. She was glad to be rid of them.

No longer did she require the secret shots of vodka. Daily she was returning to her old self. Soon she would begin painting again and Hugh and she would be married in the fall. She also had an idea many of the paintings in the vault of the Long Island mansion would be turned over to her to sell. Perhaps Jean Martin's canvases would be there and she'd be able make sure her friend's work was restored to its proper place in the world. It was almost as if Mr. Asmodeus had never entered her gallery in the first place. But not quite!

Always she would be aware of his evil lurking not far from her, waiting for that moment of weakness when he could take over her life again. But now she understood the danger! Now she would be wary!

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PATRON OF EVIL

Who was Mr. Asmodeus? He came into Marie's life when least expected ...and left without being seen by others. What strange powers did he control? Marie Holt's fiancé Hugh hinted darkly at the old man's "illegal" past, but Marie knew him only as a kindly white-haired stranger —a patron of the arts who had offered to recoup the losses of her failing art gallery. She could not refuse his generosity, and when he had proven his honorable intentions, she could not refuse the hospitality of his Long Island mansion.

But what did Mr. Asmodeus want in return? And more important— why couldn't Marie ask him this question? The mansion was a house of many mysteries--though soon it was to provide her with horrifying answers! There was a motive for the old man's kind[illegible] and Marie knew that she had[illegible] the house, bu[illegible] nightmare th[illegible]

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